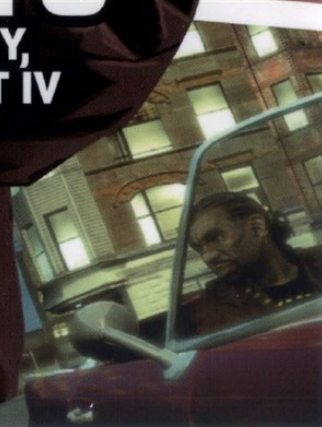


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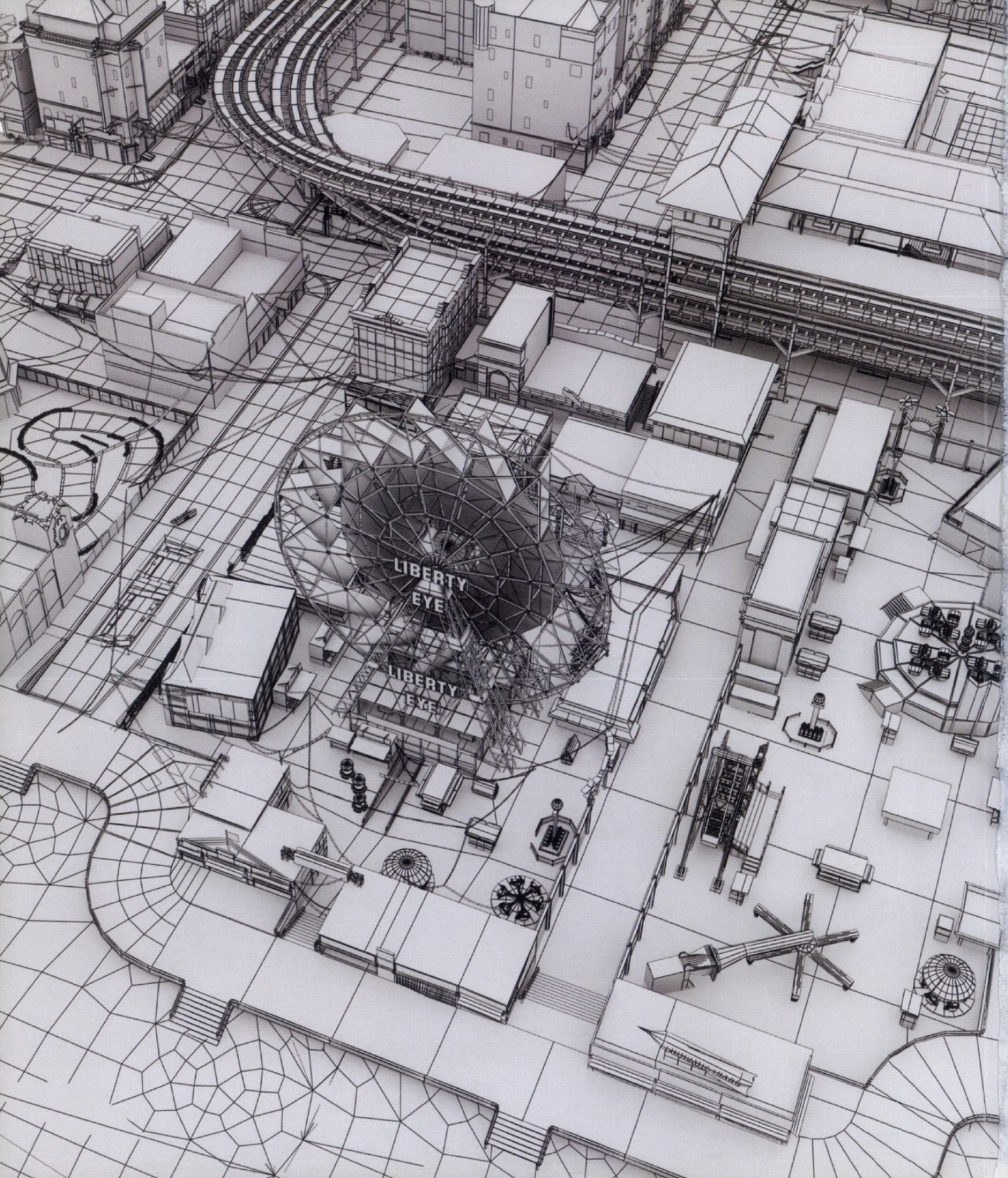
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EXCLUSIVE: INSIDE ROCKSTAR

THE MAKING OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

THE TRUE STORIES BEHIND GTIII, VICE CITY,
SAN ANDREAS AND THE MIND-BLOWING PART IV





When Sam Houser was a kid, his ambition was to run his own record label. His obsessions at the time – comics, TV, movies and, particularly, videogames – will be familiar to many **Edge** readers, but music was always the area in which he felt he could forge a career. After all, with no coding or art skills, he wasn't going to walk into a job making videogames, right?

At the age of 26, following a stint working first for BMG's super-powerful music division in London and then its less successful videogame publishing offshoot, Houser founded Rockstar Games in New York. Ten years later, the company is preparing to launch what is simultaneously the biggest title of 2008 and the most anticipated game since... well, probably since the last full-scale *Grand Theft Auto* release, 2004's staggeringly pitched *San Andreas*.

The *GTA* series' achievements to date deserve to be celebrated, even if, as Brits, we aren't usually in the habit of shouting about the sort of talent abundantly in evidence at the series' Edinburgh-based dev HQ, Rockstar North. *GTA*'s unique brand of free-roaming action was, after all, the title that inspired an entire demographic to pick up joypads for the first time since, many years previously, they decided they'd left all that behind. It drove sales of Sony's PS2 hardware like few other titles. It's redefined what gaming can represent as a cultural force. It's even, somehow, been squeezed on to PSP. Series sales to date, meanwhile? Just shy of the 65m mark.

Rockstar's journey to this point has been an unconventional one. It has been characterised by passion, dedication, the small matter of involving some of the most skilled creatives working in videogames today, and the desire, and willingness, to take risks. Not all of the risks have worked. Risks are like that. The company has known more than its fair share of controversy, too. But ultimately its hit rate remains better than any other videogame publisher's.

Partly this success is achieved thanks to Houser's outlook. He is unlike any other videogame publishing exec of his stature in the industry. His knowledge of his company's work isn't focused on sales numbers that feed into his laptop, but by a deep respect for the development process itself and a plain desire to *play* the company's games, not assess them from marketing presentations. This is clear from our recent, unprecedented five-and-a-half-hour interview with the man, which at no point felt like a sales job but rather the simple, uninhibited sharing of enthusiasm, from gamer to gamer.

Unfortunately we don't have room to reproduce all of Houser's recollections of the *GTA* series' audacious trajectory within these pages, but we do cover some serious ground in the feature beginning on page 60, which concludes with a look at the remarkable *GTAIV*.

The news that gaming has just overtaken music in terms of retail revenue emerged after our meeting with Houser, but we're sure he got a kick out of it. Movies, of course, are next.



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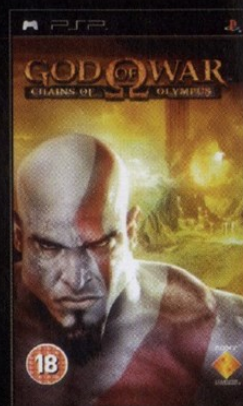
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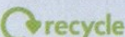
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this magazine please recycle it.



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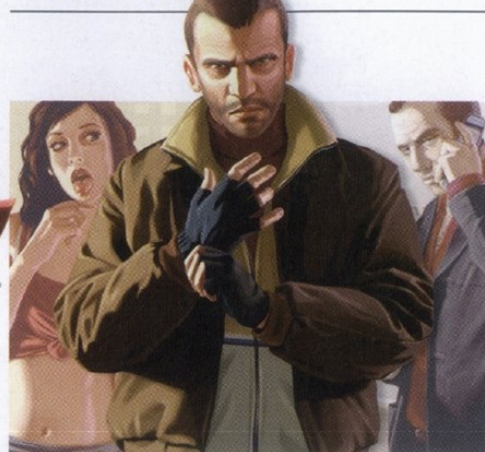
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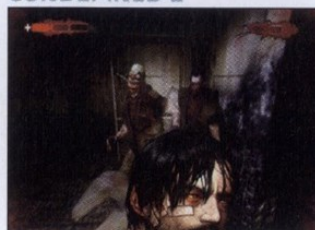
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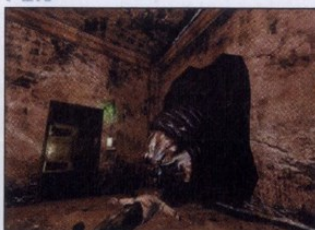
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How Radar Group hopes to close the gap between games and films



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Another continent, another show. AOU brings the future of coin-ops



Being Jordan
Game designer Jordan Thomas on bringing stories to environments

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We investigate what videogame degrees are bringing to the industry

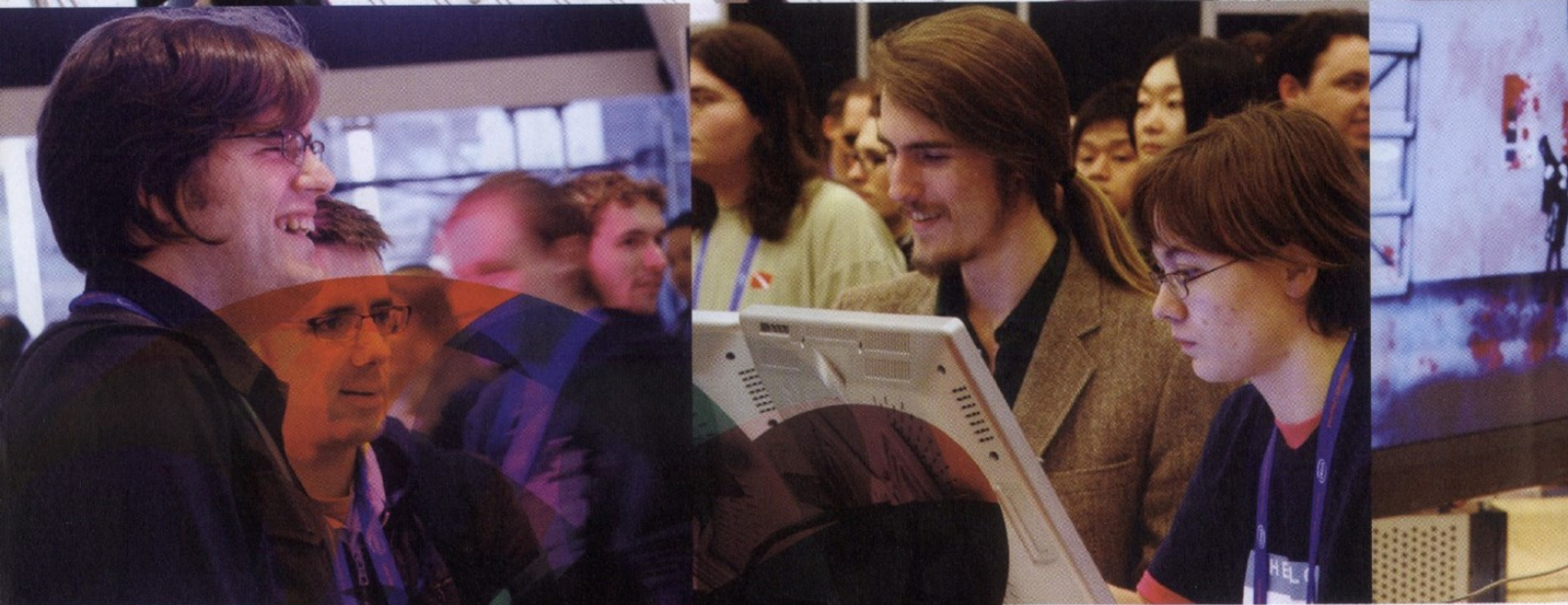
Smart casual
Casual games and the frantic race to grab your free time



START

EXPO HALL

08





EVENT

Conventional wisdom

The biggest ever Game Developers Conference mixed indies with illuminati, but it took an industry outsider to look to gaming's future

Although a significantly larger event than it was last year, GDC has managed to stave off the looming advances of commercialisation. It remains a pleasantly understated, academic affair, with its few concessions to glitz kept at arm's length from the lecture theatres where assorted developer notables gesticulate in front of PowerPoint slides. Even in the trade halls there was none of the blaring noise, flashing lights and overwhelming smog of body odour that characterises the convention's more commercial siblings (even if a few cosplayers did manage to sneak in).

The sedate pace was slowly ratcheted up over the course of the week. While San Francisco's streets emptied for President's Day (February 11),

A large number of game design lectures related to narrative, and most mentioned BioShock or Portal in the first two minutes

the lecture halls of the Moscone Center quietly filled with a series of summits dealing with mobile games, casual games, serious games, and the indies championed by the Independent Games Festival, before the lecture schedule began.

With Microsoft's overt promotion of XNA elsewhere at the conference and Sony's own stand displaying a number of indie efforts, there was much for independent developers to mull over at the two-day-long summit. But as well as a series of celebratory post-mortems, there were slightly more ambiguous stories. A Tale of Two Kyles, presented by EA's Kyle Gray, and 2DBoy's Kyle Gabler discussed the parallel development of their small, quirky games, one from within the decidedly non-indie EA and the other from within coffee shops offering free wifi. Cutting through Gabler's amusing self-deprecation, it would seem that the birth of his game, *World Of Goo*, really has been rather hard. Meanwhile, Gray's unnamed DS game featuring British stereotypes in pith helmets seems to have been fostered by EA with little detriment to his creative vision.

It raises a slight concern that large companies, seeing the success of indie titles on Live Arcade and PSN, could turn a small portion of their vast resources to regularly creating small, quirky games, piling even more pressure on indie developers. Already, as highlighted in a talk from **Edge**



This year's GDC enjoyed more media exposure than any of its previous iterations, but it lacked something with the hook of Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet* from last year's event

columnist N'Gai Croal and MTV's Stephen Totilo, *An Indie Reality Check*, it is hard for indie devs to get their game noticed in the slew of press releases from larger marketing budgets.

Elsewhere, it wasn't hard for trendspotters to pick out the development community's other bugbears. There was an overwhelming number of lectures on the game design track relating to narrative, nearly all of which mentioned either *BioShock* or *Portal* within the first two minutes. Ken Levine's own *BioShock* talk on Empowering Players to Care About Your Stupid Story perhaps set out the parameters of the debate best – defining the common difficulties of meshing narrative and game as the result of pushing a story on players. This simply doesn't play to gaming's strengths as an interactive medium – rather than push, why not invite players to pull story towards them? But the alternative is not simply to make involvement with the narrative optional: instead, Levine favours investing the entirety of your world-building with narrative. The world is the thing that games render best, and it must therefore act as your narrator, weeping its story from every pore. Much of this can be achieved in the audio space as well as visually, and Levine offered examples showing how *BioShock* moved from damp corridor shooter to sumptuous jazz-age dystopia ringing with advertisements and propagandist announcements



True to its roots, GDC was a pretty sedate affair this year, with even the largest displays, such as Microsoft's highly visible XNA presence, lacking in bombast

that reinforced its design aspects. However, Levine admits that he had a rare privilege in being able to rework the narrative throughout the design phase, only reaching its final form eight months from the date of release. It's something that he felt was utterly necessary in order to achieve the synthesis of design and narrative, but something that was a bone of contention amongst the team – minor narrative changes have large repercussions at other points of production.

A lively panel discussion on the future of story in game design also pointed further at the practical difficulties; the conventional production pipeline doesn't often permit such a high level integration of narrative and design, resulting in fractious games where the

story is delivered in between bouts of play.

Few on the panel, however, were uncertain of story's place in games. "We're not a technology-driven industry, we're an entertainment

industry," said Silicon Knights president **Denis Dyack**, dismissing the idea that gaming could continue to wow with graphical leaps alone. Content, he said, is king – and there was little doubt that to him this meant narrative. Matthew Karch of Saber Interactive was the only one to demur, and although his reasoning was that he just liked the low-brow joy of blasting stuff with a big gun, there was a worrying sense that the others on the panel felt that gaming's only route to artistic merit was through its ability to deliver narrative. Karch has a point that games often have just as much to offer from their mechanics alone.

Indeed, the paucity of lectures dealing with the mechanics of interaction at any artistic level was conspicuous. It's hard to deny that *Portal*'s humour and writing makes it compelling, but there was a sense that many of the lectures at GDC saw the success of both it and *BioShock* as a prescription for game design in a much broader sense.

Matthew Karch's reasoning was that he just liked the low-brow joy of blasting stuff with a big gun



We can rebuild you

One man's great visions of the future

Many of the predictions made by GDC keynote speaker and futurist Ray Kurzweil, although not directly related to gaming, were of such grand general significance that their impact could only be relevant. Although they seem surprising, to say the least, Kurzweil contends that exponential growth is always surprising to the human mind, which tends to plot things linearly. With the exponential development of nano-engineering technology, Kurzweil suggested that the energy crisis would be over within 20 years, and that by 2029 we will be able to reverse-engineer the human brain. If we follow an exponential curve of life expectancy we see that, by 2024, we start adding a year to our lives every year. So, as Kurzweil said, hang on in there.

Among the other recurring themes of the conference were accessibility and casual play, both of which were discussed outside the conference at a 'Luminaries Lunch' organised by Shiny founder David Perry, where the connection between depth and complexity was roundly debunked. The panel, made up of Raph Koster, Peter Molyneux, Chris Taylor, David Perry, a pre-resignation **Phil Harrison** and Neil Young, unanimously hailed Nintendo's Wii control method as a triumph of accessibility. By contrast, hand a 360 controller or DualShock to someone who hasn't played games before and, in the words of Harrison, it's "like handing someone a grenade with the pin taken out".

Molyneux offered *Fable 2* as his effort towards courting casual gamers, saying that it was his dream that a non-gamer could immediately pick up the pad and play alongside any hardcore player. With a staggering 200 million people playing PopCap games, according to Koster, it's not hard to see why everyone seated at the table was eager to open up their games to a more casual audience. Social gaming rapidly emerged as one major avenue into the casual market, again championed by Nintendo. Both Koster and Perry are involved in ventures to engage their audience in the creative process, and Harrison too reinforced the importance of this. Generational leaps in technology did not really define the 'next gen' in any significant way – rather it is characterised by connectivity and community.

Gas Powered Games' Taylor also saw the



From left: Neil Young, head of EA's LA Studio; Sony's head of worldwide studios (at the time) Phil Harrison; Gas Powered Games CEO Chris Taylor; founder of MMO-maker Areare and *Ultima Online* designer Raph Koster; and Lionhead's Peter Molyneux were part of the Luminaries Lunch hosted by David Perry, ex of Shiny Entertainment and now working on Project Top Secret

Indie winners

The top titles from The Independent Games Festival

- 1 Seumas McNally Grand Prize: *Crayon Physics Deluxe*, by Kloonigames
- 2 Best Web Browser Game: *Iron Dukes*, by One Ton Ghost
- 3 Design Innovation Award: *World Of Goo*, by 2D Boy
- 4 Excellence in Visual Art: *Fez*, by Kokoromi
- 5 Excellence in Audio: *Audiosurf*, by Invisible Handlebar
- 6 Technical Excellence: *World Of Goo*, by 2D Boy
- 7 Best Student Game: *Synaesthete*, by DigiPen Institute of Technology
- 8 Audience Award: *Audiosurf*, by Invisible Handlebar

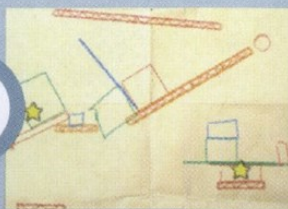
internet as fundamental to the future of games, if only due to piracy, stating that it would only be a short while before all PC games will be server-based and require you to be online at all times. But while Koster pointed to other practical advantages, particularly in the mapping of player behaviour and a faster iteration speed, he also highlighted some of the difficulties developers will face: as more and more devices get connected, it will become increasingly difficult for developers to predict what platform they will end up on. He cited the example of playing a web-game through an iPhone, a Wii Internet Channel, or a tablet PC. In fact, to Koster, Flash is the real next-gen console, because of its connectivity and ubiquity: apparently, Flash is installed in greater numbers on computers than there are consoles of the last two generations put together.

Connectivity and community were phrases that popped up everywhere at GDC, not least in the Microsoft keynote, which claimed that there are 30 per cent more uploads of user-generated content in *Halo 3* every day than there are videos uploaded to YouTube. The announcement by Microsoft's XNA boss Chris Satchell that XNA games would be made available via Live was followed by an outline of a peer-review system, and a further revelation of these games' portability to the Zune. Even the presentation of *Ninja Gaiden II* made a nod to such community efforts, allowing you to record entire sections of the game and tie them to your score on the leaderboards. Molyneux rounded off the



The PhaseSpace optical motion-capture system shown at GDC allows realtime streaming of mo-cap data into the Unreal Engine

1



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8



Gameloft's Michel Guillemot (left) spoke about an industry jump toward mobile gaming, while NeuroSky demonstrated its brain-control headsets at the GDC Expo

keynote by promising drop-in-drop-out co-op in *Table 2*, and the ability to move in-game resources, such as money, between co-op and singleplayer, as well as from separate XBLA titles.

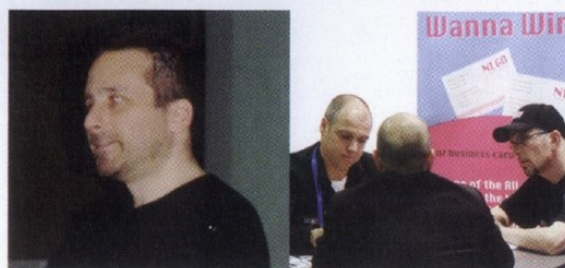
If we are to heed the sentiments emerging from GDC, then connecting machines and people appears to be the new frontier for game development, and it was interesting to talk to developers about what they thought the future of gaming platforms would look like in the portable, always-online age that looms just around the corner. Needless to say, few were thinking as far ahead or as radically as Ray

Kurzweil, the futurist and eminent inventor of the flatbed scanner and optical character recognition, who took the stage to deliver a fascinating, if eyebrow-raising, keynote. Aside from spending the majority of the keynote suavely assuring us of how right he's been in the past, he threw out a number of predictions for the future that will impact on the way people will play games.



Epic's Cliff B took to the stage wearing a tasteful black jacket and wielding a full-size Lance model

With full-immersion virtual reality delivered from our own nervous system only 21 years away, it seems that the discussion of how many cores the next generation of consoles will use may already be getting past its expiry date. Far fetched as it may seem, Kurzweil's talk did at least serve to blow away the cobwebs – an antidote to the reactive, obsessive discussions that attempted to synthesise the perfect game recipe from the success stories of the last 12 months. The highlight of the Luminaries Lunch proved that GDC, far from being just a celebration of hindsight, can also be a lens that focuses the future of this medium.



Ken Levine (above left) is creative director at 2K Boston, formerly Irrational Games, and the man behind *BioShock* presented an unconventional talk on gaming stories



Radar Group's leading men (from far left): Hollywood-based producer Scott Faye, 3D Realms head Scott Miller, and Arush chief Jim Perkins

Flying under the radar

Scott Miller thinks he's found the key to making good games – and good movies based on them

As we reported last month, Hollywood is currently on a videogame spree, snapping up franchise after franchise. In most cases, however, the relationship between game and movie companies is a story of two separate worlds reaching out to each other across a cultural void, with the movie studios failing to grasp the elements that make the games such a draw for audiences, and game publishers failing to produce games that naturally extend into being filmable.

“Through our experience over the years in this industry, it's very clear that publishers don't think of the bigger picture when it comes to an original IP”

Videogame veterans **Scott Miller**, founder of 3D Realms, and **Jim Perkins**, founder of Arush Entertainment, have teamed up with Hollywood producer Scott Faye (the man behind the upcoming *Max Payne* movie), president of Depth Entertainment, to create Radar Group, a production company that plans to work closely with Hollywood. This multimedia IP company is already overseeing development of six new



game franchises, with the first titles expected to hit retail shelves in late 2009 (see 'Games on the radar' for a look at the first three titles the company has in development: *Prey 2*, *Earth No More* and *Incarnate*).

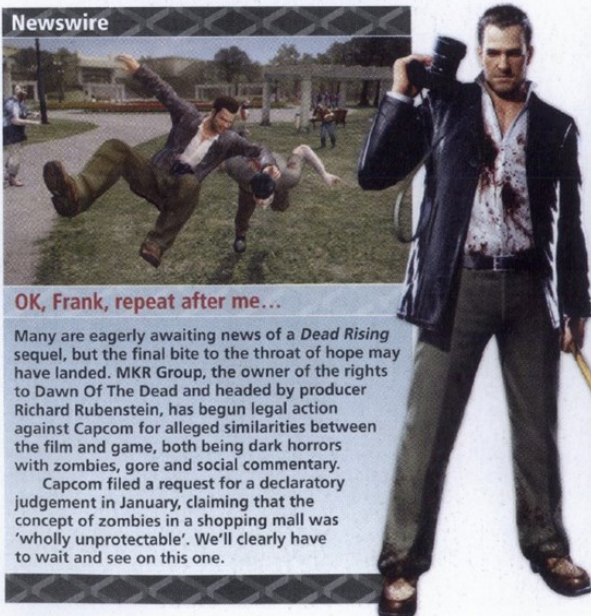
The company will attempt to retain the core founders' independent spirits – with 3D Realms' background as a chief proponent of shareware – by exclusively teaming up with independent game developers to create potential 'cross-media' franchises. In addition, each game will be independently financed. Radar, which currently has eight employees, will work with major game publishers to distribute its releases worldwide across PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. And,

according to Miller, who will remain CEO of 3D Realms and is chief creative officer of Radar, these game franchises may later appear on Wii, DS and PSP.

Certainly, there have been attempts at such cross-media companies before, and we feature a game from one, Blue Omega's *Damnation*, in this issue (p38). And then there's Brash Entertainment, which is currently working on games based on *Saw* and *Jumper*, but has been criticised by many industry observers and insiders, including Miller, who feel its formula of only creating games based on movie licences will find little success.

What differentiates Radar is that its focus will be on original games. It will develop new franchises

Newsire



OK, Frank, repeat after me...

Many are eagerly awaiting news of a *Dead Rising* sequel, but the final bite to the throat of hope may have landed. MKR Group, the owner of the rights to *Dawn Of The Dead* and headed by producer Richard Rubenstein, has begun legal action against Capcom for alleged similarities between the film and game, both being dark horrors with zombies, gore and social commentary.

Capcom filed a request for a declaratory judgement in January, claiming that the concept of zombies in a shopping mall was 'wholly unprotectable'. We'll clearly have to wait and see on this one.





designed from the outset to sell to Hollywood through Faye and his new LA-based production company, Depth Entertainment, which is owned by Radar. Depth is behind the Max Payne movie for 20th Century Fox, starring Mark Wahlberg, which started filming in early March. It is currently in talks about bringing a feature film based on *Prey* to Hollywood studios, as well as some of Radar Group's other games.

For Faye, most convergence between films and games fails because there's no thought from the outset about a franchise spread across the two media forms. He claims that each of Radar's properties will have all the hooks in place to afford interesting gameplay on the interactive side, and fully developed stories that will make the translation to the big screen more fluent.

"Through our experience over the years in this industry, it's very clear that publishers don't think of the bigger picture when it comes to an original IP," Miller explains. "They're pretty much focused on the game side of the equation. They don't really look at IPs as trans-media or cross-media properties that they can exploit fully." And this is something, of course, that he hopes to change.

The goal is to oversee eight to 12 titles at a time with as many as three or four games being released each year once production is in full swing. "We want for each of our games to be a major release," says Perkins. "We're not just throwing a bunch of mud against the wall to see what sticks. We really want to purposefully design hits and unique properties, similar to how Pixar works with CGI movies."

With Max Payne, the first film out of Depth Entertainment, the stage has been set for Radar to seek success across two entertainment media. It's certainly a challenge, one that even large publishers have yet to accomplish, but the independent roots of this new contender could be the key to success.



Games on the radar

What's coming to the small, and big, screen?

■ Earth No More

Developer: Recoil Games

Platforms: 360, PC, PS3

In this take on the disaster movie, players will control a group of characters that must co-operate to survive. The NPC characters making up the player's squad will have their own motivations, so they won't just dumbly tag along. The disaster is the result of global warming – after centuries of pollution and poor caretaking, Miller says, Earth has 'turned against man'.

■ Prey 2

Developer: Human Head Studios

Platforms: 360, PC, PS3

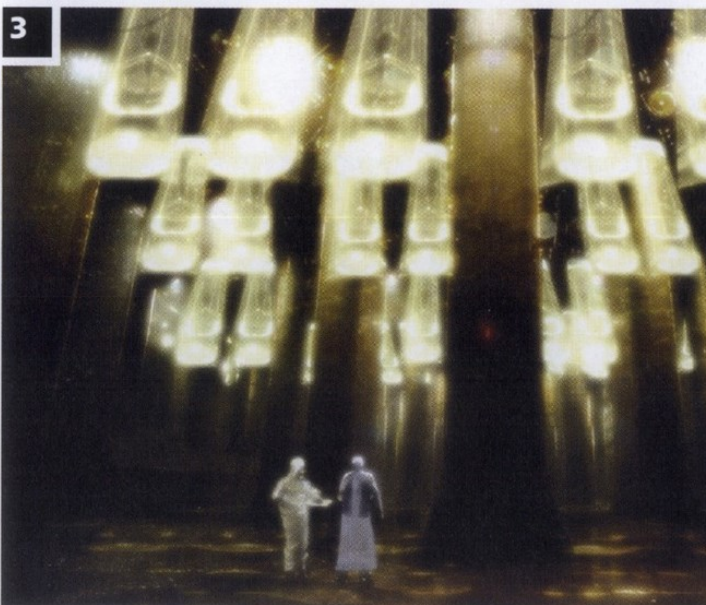
Prey 2 picks up several years after the first game, with Tommy being released from jail after being unjustly blamed for the unexplained disappearances of several people on his reservation. The game will develop its predecessor's portals concept and add new spirit powers, according to Miller, as well as fill in a lot of narrative holes that were present in the original.

■ Incarnate

Developer: TBA

Platforms: 360, PC, PS3

Set in Chicago, this firstperson-perspective 'chaser game' has players on the hunt for Incarnates, the reincarnated souls of history's most demonic characters. Set in an open environment representation of the city's rooftops and streets, this game will incorporate "elaborate chase gameplay that *Assassin's Creed* barely touched upon", claims Miller.





Pounds for pounds

After all the doom and gloom, some good news from Tokyo's AOU Show: arcade gaming's got its fight back

The relationship between Japan's foremost arcade shows, JAMMA and AOU, is best described as one of call and response: the first signals the trends (seldom positive in recent years), the second presents the solutions. At JAMMA 2007, the message was the decline of the versus fighting game, the launch of *Virtua Fighter 5* sating the appetites of fans but restoring the genre's overall punch. February's AOU, then, at Tokyo's Makuhari Messe, was nothing less than a battle royal.

The victor, of course, was *Street Fighter IV* (see p41), demoed for the first time to a crowd of

Playable builds of Street Fighter IV drew queues of up to 90 at a time, a feat unmatched by any of its showfloor competitors in any genre

industry insiders and consumers. Playable builds drew queues of up to 90 at a time, a feat unmatched by any of its showfloor competitors in any genre. The consensus: that despite its 3D makeover, *SFIV* is an entirely familiar game – and that that's a good thing. The only mild controversy surrounded the cabinet price, deemed steep for a game based on Taito's affordable Type X2 hardware. That, it emerged, was due to the enforced bundle being offered: four cabinets and four game boards, together with networking kit and a small stockpile of branded IC Cards.

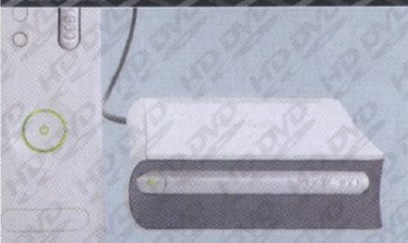
More was revealed of the game's network mode, dubbed Link Matching System, which uses Taito's NESYS technology to join cabinets to local- and wide-area networks. There were also hints as to future applications of the SFIV IC Card: unspecified 'services' to accompany the usual game saves. A deluxe version of *SFIV* arrives first, in July, housed in Taito's showpiece VEWLIX cabinet which will be followed in August by standard uprights.

Elsewhere, the fight spilled over into the Makuhari Messe, Sega unveiling not just the anticipated 'ver.D' of *Virtua Fighter 5*, with its ludicrous costumes and tournament tweaks, but the more ambitious *Virtua Fighter 5 R* (short for Revolution). The blink-and-you'll-miss-it trailer gave little away beyond the arrival of new character Karateka, though many of the stages bore a discernibly darker look. Was Sega, asked some, testing the water before embarking on a potential *Virtua Fighter 6*, or even a new fighting franchise? No one was saying.

Namco, meanwhile, expressed satisfaction with its early sales of *Tekken 6*, the evidence being that more casual fight fans welcomed the less demanding combat. As a mark of how little the genre has travelled over the years, few of the big names, including ten-year absentee *Street Fighter*, found any real difficulty in settling back into their respective grooves. Only SNK Playmore, keen to advertise its revival after the demise of Atomiswave, seemed in the slightest bit nervous.

Going one further than Capcom, SNK plans to release its latest generation of fighters not just on Taito hardware (again, the popular Type X2 board) but actually through Taito, the publisher. *Samurai Spirits Sen*, a spin-off from a franchise scarcely known outside Asia, hopes to boost its roster and audience simultaneously, its 24 characters split evenly between favourites and international newcomers. Developer K2, however, recent custodian of the *Tenchu* series, hasn't quite retained the palette of earlier versions, with *Sen* arriving in rather ashen 3D. Much now rides on how fans react to its

Newsire



The end of another format war

The HD wars finally ended on February 19, as Toshiba announced that it would discontinue production of HD-DVD. Several key partners in both production and retail – among them Warner Bros, Netflix and Wal-Mart – recently announced their intention to stop supporting the format by mid 2008 in favour of Blu-ray, making the decision inevitable. Microsoft swiftly discontinued production of the Xbox 360's HD-DVD drive a few days later, and has reduced the price to \$50 in the US. Which almost seems like a bargain.

Although this all goes some way towards validating Sony's decision to go with Blu-ray for PS3, Microsoft has always been clear it would consider other types of external media-delivery devices, although we don't expect to see an Xbox 360 Blu-ray drive any time soon, if ever. The real winners, of course, are consumers who no longer have to sustain two incompatible formats.



Is the era of hardware-based music games coming to an end? If it is, it's less the fault of fighting games than a general confusion within Japan's family entertainment sector. This has been attributed to various things, from a drop in free time to the all-conquering Wii



The SFIV cabinets were just prototypes, albeit with HD displays to do justice to the visuals, and overlays detailing moves. Photography was prohibited, of course, not that many paid much heed

fighting system, partly culled from older games but substantially new. Amusingly, SNK's bid to differentiate its leading brand, *King Of Fighters*, has been to leave it in classic 2D, though with completely new artwork for both backdrops and characters. About time, remarked some as the game, *King Of Fighters XII*, finally threw off its Neo-Geo baggage.

Of the remaining fighters – and there were a lot – the potential seemed to lie with the licensed titles, otaku anime still a reliable money-spinner no matter what genre it's applied to. Cavia and Bing's *Fate Unlimited Codes* appeared at the Capcom booth (its manufacturer), while AQ Interactive's *Arcana Heart 2* hopes to follow the success of its predecessor, released for PS2 in October 2007. Arc System Works, meanwhile, jettisoned its flagging *Guilty Gear* series to unveil a popular 3D contender, *BlazBlue*.

Prior to this year's event, there was speculation as to how the industry's frontrunners, many of them having merged over the last five years, would promote their brands. In the end, strange as it was to see Square Enix banners at an arcade fair, old distinctions were honoured. Never did the company's merger with Taito obscure that hallowed coin-op name, buoyed as it's been by the uptake of Type X2. Bandai Namco Games, meanwhile, conceded much of its booth space to *Gundam VS Gundam*, a team-based network game from Banpresto, leaving *Tekken 6* in the company of *Midnight Run 3* and *Free Turn*.

Understandably, it was the child and family markets that seemed

most disrupted, largely by the domestic onslaught of Wii. Once the industry's strongholds, here they presented a jumble of different approaches and themes. Many, among them quiz shows and basic arcade games, were aimed more at socialising couples. Then there was Konami's *Action Deka*, a gimmicky, irresistible score attack in which you fire two telescopic fists at an upright board of targets.

Despite its loyalty to Sega's now-decrepit Naomi board, the scrolling shooter was also stubbornly represented by new titles. Of course, the authors were the same – Cave, Milestone and G.rev – the games being *DoDonPachi Dai-Fukkatsu*, the rather blinding *Iruvero* and (gulp) *Mamoru kunha Norowareteshimatta*.

With Sega keeping its plans for the lucrative trading card genre quiet, handing Square Enix something of a coup as it unveiled the fast-paced, sexily packaged *Lord Of Vermilion*, those looking for portents left empty-handed. Such is the case with AOU Shows generally. Eyes now turn to JAMMA for signs of the next big thing, or, with this being the arcade industry, the simple reassurance that there is a next big thing.



Capcom's official SFIV images continue to focus on just the one polished level, Chun-Li's Chinese market. More were shown at AOU, though many were still either locked or clearly unfinished



Samurai Spirits Sen isn't nearly as decisive and attractive a 3D update as SFIV, despite appearing on the same hardware. That said, there's no knocking those sword swipes





WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

If the aliens from *Space Invaders* had a little more firepower and a wicked sense of humour, they'd be much as they appear on *Retro Sabotage*. The site plays around with old classics such as the aforementioned shooter, *Pac-Man*, *Pong* and *Tetris* and makes something new from skewed versions of the games' dynamics. Going into specifics would be to spoil the experience, but suffice it to say each small game has something guaranteed to raise a smile. Thus far only the four games mentioned have been treated, but with updates every Thursday it won't be long before a sizeable archive is in place. The site also welcomes contributions – so if you've had an idea for a bit of *Defender* slapstick, get involved.

Site:
Retro Sabotage
URL:
www.retrosabotage.com

The White Space lecture pulls apart the Shalebridge Cradle – describing it as a synthesis of narrative theme, play dynamics, artistic motif and sound design that Thomas likens to an orchestra



DEVELOPMENT

White space cadet

Jordan Thomas pulls back the curtain on *BioShock's* Fort Frolic. The secret is hidden in what isn't there

We catch up with 2K Marin's **Jordan Thomas** (facing page) at the University of Teesside's Animex festival. He has just delivered a dizzying, polemical lecture, entitled *White Space*, to a packed hall of students and recent graduates from Teesside's various videogame courses. The audience may have left complaining of aching cerebrums but their enthusiasm for their chosen vocation is visibly multiplied. Sitting down with Thomas once his voice has recovered, it seems only appropriate to talk about his own genesis as a game designer given the academic setting.

"I still get excited like a kid about a great idea. Excited like a kid about things that games are allowing people to do that other media never have"

"I wanted to be an animator for a while and I thought about going into film," says Thomas. "But as a player of games the critical thought phase happened far earlier than me even thinking about getting a job doing it. It was something like: 'The entertainment is available; the entertainment is

complex; the entertainment bears critique'. So, I feel like game developers are made quite early and they're shaping themselves with things like education. I feel like if you come in with a philosophy degree, or you worked in the Peace Corps, or you were a nun for ten years, you're going to bring something to the game that somebody else wouldn't."

Clearly, catholic tastes and a self-described 'pathological curiosity' have worked well for Thomas. An inauspicious start at Psygnosis, where his biggest contribution to games was the odd

line of dialogue, was followed by a move to EA and then Ion Storm, before it collapsed "under the weight of our own hubris". Now, having worked on the much-lauded Fort Frolic level of *BioShock* and the

equally admired Shalebridge Cradle from *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, he has taken up the creative directorship at 2K's newly formed Marin studio. We wonder how many of the students at Animex will fulfil their dream of working in such a creatively rewarding position as his own.

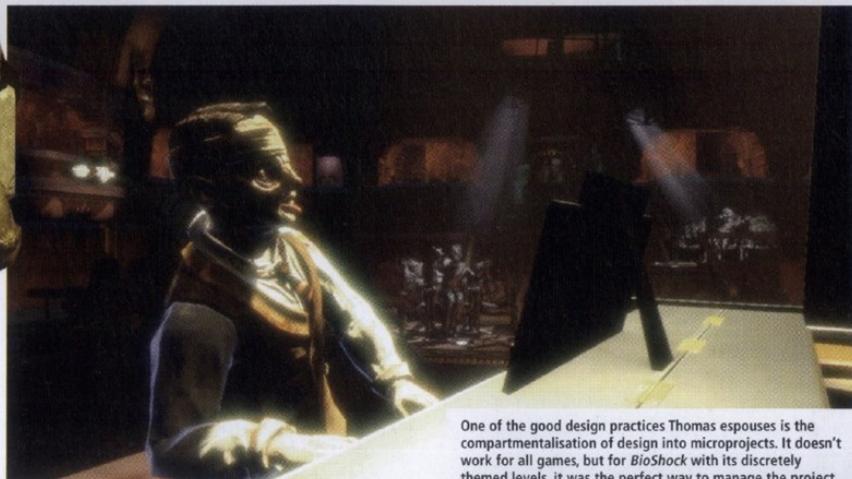
"Being bright-eyed and naïve," says Thomas, "it's sort of a critical phase of energy that everyone needs to maintain momentum as they move into the private sector. When you have someone expecting a commercial product out of you, some of your momentum will be ploughed off. You still need your Peter Pan attitude."

And does he still have a Peter Pan attitude?

"I certainly still get excited like a kid about a great idea. Excited like a kid about things that games are allowing people to do that other media never have. Peter Pan after all was this notion of belief being turned into the ability to fly. We're getting there. We're carving out new vectors of human experience that are impossible outside of a simulation and that will always make me excited."

It's a neat segue into the material of his lecture. The talk covered good design practices and disambiguated notions of immersion and 'vibe' – but fundamentally it concerned the ability of videogames to give the player an experience distinct from that of any other medium. The secret, says Thomas, is in the undefined space, the area of the gameworld where the player expresses his freedom of thought, his ingenuity, and together with the game becomes the author of his own





One of the good design practices Thomas espouses is the compartmentalisation of design into microprojects. It doesn't work for all games, but for *BioShock* with its discretely themed levels, it was the perfect way to manage the project

experience. Using a practical example, *BioShock* offers up a handful of abilities and tools that can be combined, but leaves the exact solution to many of the game's dilemmas up to the player. Thomas shows a video in which a player attaches as many proximity mines as he can to a propane cylinder, carries it some distance through the level using telekinesis, and then sends it flying into a Big Daddy's face to kill it instantly. He describes another event: the player stands unseen on a balcony, creating a hologram of himself on the floor below. Then finally, only when the room is completely full of enemies making futile attacks on the hologram, he drops a payload of explosives into the middle.

Freedom isn't a new concept in videogames – the phrase 'emergent gameplay' has been much used in recent years to describe player behaviour outside that immediately intended by designers – but rarely has the concept been so carefully deconstructed as in Thomas' lecture.

"Those things which you want the player to take away from the game, not having created them themselves, like a narrative goal – those are your gross shapes," says Thomas. "The space around those shapes is something that singleplayer developers have to do a lot more thinking about."

Unfortunately, Thomas can't talk about the new project underway at 2K Marin, but it's not hard to extrapolate from this talk that it will leave considerable room for the player's self-expression – freedom which, unusually for games, has not come at the expense of narrative in his past projects; both the Shalebridge Cradle and Fort Frolic are saturated with stories that reach the player obliquely, through the level design itself.

"I really like the idea of the player being able to create dynamic physical attachments – Rube Goldberg machines of death!" says Thomas,



Thomas says that *BioShock*'s ability to link together its various systems helped facilitate player creativity: "You can give people tools that work together in simple ways. There's a lot you can do with one type of rope, one type of pulley, one type of ball bearing"

talking vaguely of future ambitions that may or may not be realised in his new project. "Those little chains of intent, those little arcs of player creativity are better expressed by tools that plug into each other. *BioShock* has a really great first crop of that kind of thing, but in games I do in the future I'll want to generate much more of that – maybe give the player the ability to steal superpowers from characters that are wandering around the world, or alter their behaviour in ways that amount to more than just getting them to fight each other. There's a lot of potential real estate there."

(More of this interview can be found on www.next-gen.biz. Watch out for the video of Thomas' lecture on his website, currently under construction at jordanthomas.net)



"Everyone in my family is mad at me but I tell them that if they want money, go out and earn it."

Dr Kawashima suffers his outraged family in refusing to take royalties from *Brain Training*

"You know, honestly, I've been too busy recently trying to figure out why the fuck go-karts shoot banana peels."

David Jaffe addresses the elephant in the room responding to Shigeru Miyamoto's dismissal of putting guns on cars

"Bullfrog, Origin, Westwood – all no longer exist today because something broke... and I'll simply state that EA blew it, and to a certain degree, since I was involved, I blew it."

EA president **John Riccitiello** holds his hands up about dissolving some of its most seminal studios

"I was a bit of a prat back then, to be honest. To be fair, I think [EA] didn't do anything bad. I was just very immature, and I was coming to terms with not having 30 of my friends but instead having 200 strangers around me. That was difficult, and I made life difficult for them."

No, no, no – the Bullfrog thing was my fault too, says **Peter Molyneux**

"I describe myself as the bargain basement Will Wright, the Wal-Mart version of Peter Molyneux."

There, there, **Warren Spector** – we love you just as much as those other guys

"So if Seth Gordon once again in an interview says: 'Billy Mitchell and his minions have started a smear campaign against the film...' I mean, where have I said anything negative about the film? I don't! I'm sure it's entertaining. I guess that's the best thing that can be said."

Billy Mitchell has no problem at all with *The King of Kong*



EDUCATION



Teacher feature

Game design courses are big with students but the industry remains wary. We visited the University of Teesside to see how it answers the critics

You can say we're responding to the market and educating students," says **Dr James TerKeurst**, director of the University of Teesside's Institute for Digital Innovation, "but that's only half of it – you actually have to help create the market."

It's a truism that produces mixed feelings – happiness that the University of Teesside and regional business initiatives like Digital City do so much to support students of its game design degree, even once they've graduated, and concern

within the industry? Or are universities cashing in on a saleable idea at the expense of their students?

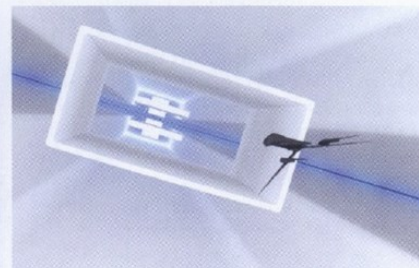
"One thing that no one from the industry seems to realise is that a university is a business," says Rare's senior software engineer **Nick Burton**. "Yes, they exist to educate people, but unless a course or department is financially viable it will close. Application numbers for many computing and IT related courses have been on the decline, much like the other sciences, and attaching 'games' to a course helps draw in new people."

Defining these in the context of a tangible goal – and an alluring form of entertainment – may well be an effective means of enthusing students, but a corollary to this is that game design courses narrow a student's potential field of employment. It's also easy to question the quality of these vocational courses in such a young and rapidly moving industry, particularly when only four have achieved accreditation from Skillset, the industry body set up to support training in the audio visual industries.

"It's a tragedy," says Frontier's **David Braben**. "Students are going to be saddled with debt for a course that doesn't necessarily teach them stuff that's useful. They're teaching things that you might have seen in games 15 or 20 years ago. It's easy to teach, but it's not a lot of use, and at the end of it you haven't actually got something."

"Applications for many computing and IT-related courses have been on the decline, much like the other sciences, and attaching 'games' to a course helps draw in new people"

that this is one of very few exceptions amongst the 290-odd game design courses around the country. When we visit Middlesbrough to check out the university's animation festival Animex, which hauls in guest-speakers from across the world to talk and network with students, we are heartened by the number and nature of opportunities presented to students. But does the sudden inundation of game-related degree courses really point to an equal demand for graduates



One of the most recent groups of Teesside graduates to be incubated on the campus is **Philanthropy Studios**. Its original title, *Synthesia* (above), has acted as a flagship tech demo



Digital City is not solely for the benefit of students – a major impetus behind it is the regeneration of the Tees Valley

"ANIMEX"

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ANIMATION & COMPUTER GAMES

START



Major benefits of the Teesside course include low overheads and industry contacts that are made freely available

Universities like Teesside would certainly challenge such statements but, if nothing else, Braben's words suggest that potential employers are not yet convinced by the quality of these courses – indeed, there may even be a risk of stigmatisation.

Other developers we speak to voice a range of concerns about these courses: can many of those teaching really be experts in the field? Can the courses adequately assess the skill needs of the development community? Can the technology used and techniques taught keep up with industry standards? Dave Sharp, head of the Digital City Business initiative, sees the latter as a particular concern, stating that only two of the universities he deals with follow his advice, regularly implementing changes to keep step with the industry. For others, including Rare's Burton, the prevailing opinion is that game courses often misunderstand what developers look for in studios. "It pains me to see some courses teaching very specific vocational skills like Maya, or Visual Studio, as key components," says Burton. "These are great additional skills but not core transferable skills like shape and form, or software engineering, or maths – the industry needs to tell educators this and to stop looking to them to fill our immediate short-term skills gaps."

Burton says that developers must build

relationships with universities, explain their requirements and contribute their experience through guest lectures. Rare itself has reaped the benefits, employing 90 per cent of its current workforce out of university. Understandably, the universities should be keen to reciprocate and Teesside offers a model example, with an infrastructure that supports and nurtures talent after the degree's completion.

As well as staging inspirational conferences such as Animex, graduates are aided in starting their own companies through the Digital City scheme. Partnered with the local council and the university, Digital City offers a process of incubation, by which new companies are rented office space on Teesside's campus at a reduced rate and given access to mentors and coaches. There are already a number of start-up game developers to benefit from this, almost entirely formed by graduates from Teesside's course. Even if these studios never ship a product – and some already have – they will gain experience which will create clearer routes into the industry.

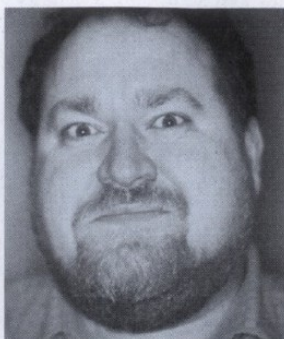
It's something corroborated by the speakers at Animex, who unanimously say that an applicant's portfolio is more important than their degree. "I think because game developers are so results

oriented, a portfolio of something that is playable or beautiful or emotive seems to trump everything," says **Jordan Thomas**, creative director at the newly formed 2K Marin studio. "There's a sort of air of reality and legitimacy to somebody who has convinced themselves that what they've done could ship – it's up to that standard."

It's hard to look at Teesside's graduate infrastructure and disagree that it provides a great opportunity for students to seek out other talented individuals and together produce tangible evidence of their talent. Similarly, the ever-increasing size of the Animex conference is proof positive that Teesside is doing much to legitimise its course and mitigate many of the difficulties of its vocational degree program. But, says Burton, if the growing games industry is to benefit from this influx of talent then the success of a few courses is not enough: "This doesn't mean we should ignore the others – no, we should help them improve! We need to stop being parsimonious about our time and money as only together will we truly be able to devote enough resources to help educators understand our business and our needs."

And that's one lesson that the industry as whole, rather than just the students, can take away from Animex.





(From left to right) One keynote speaker was ex-Sony and Sega boss Bernie Stolar, who is now the games evangelist for Google AdSense. Oberon's Ben Powers in action during a panel talk on trends in casual gaming. Alex St John from Wild Tangent is focusing on a more hardcore-style of casual games



PopCap's John Vechey reckons casual developers have to reach out to the 80 per cent of 'non-gamers' with higher quality games

Casual going hardcore?

Casual Connect proved how tough it is to make big bucks in the casual market

Attend any show dedicated to a sector of the videogame industry and it doesn't take too long to discover its quirks and concerns. The recent Casual Connect conference held in Amsterdam provided ample opportunity to understand that the casual gaming market might be burgeoning, but it's proving hard to make money. Companies involved, such as EA's Pogo.com portal, Microsoft's MSN, Realgames, PopCap and the rest, satisfy a huge audience of over 100 million players per month. And the people in this audience tend to play for long periods of time, too.

Andrew Pederson, vice president and general manager of Pogo, claimed his players averaged 57

minutes per day, almost three times as long as MySpace or Facebook users. And the main issue debated over the two-day event was how to convert such devotion to simple games such as *Bejeweled*, *Diner Dash* and *Granny In Paradise* into more cash. Despite its huge playerbase, it's estimated the casual gaming market is only worth around \$2 billion, and this includes a sizeable contribution from mobile games.

According to PopCap co-founder John Vechey, one reason is the tendency of portals to overlook the quality of their games and instead promote quantity, which has reduced punters' perceived value of their wares. Ron Powers, vice president of content business development at Oberon, a game aggregator with partnership deals at AOL, Yahoo, MTV and MySpace, says the company had been offered 1,300 games for distribution in 2007. Small

wonder the market was becoming commoditised, he argued, before suggesting that the 'rule of thumb' sub-one per cent rate at which customers actually buy games instead of just playing the demo is not sufficient to grow future earnings.

Companies are approaching this problem in very different ways. For PopCap, a developer built on the success of *Bejeweled*, Vechey said it was releasing fewer, better games and looking to

rework them for new platforms such as iPod and Xbox Live Arcade. It's considering Wii and DS too.

EA's Pogo, meanwhile, is becoming more like an online community portal, and

demonstrating strong growth in paid subscriber numbers thanks to extras such as exclusive games, avatar customisation, badge collection and advanced communication features. Pederson said this has resulted in Club Pogo players spending an average of 14 hours online per week, a figure akin to MMOG activity.

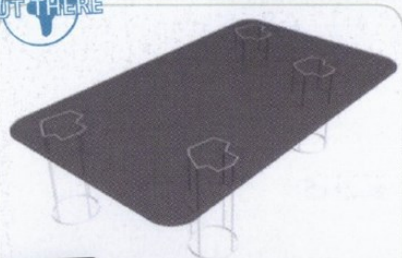
Still, as with all conferences, there were a few mavericks in the mix. At Casual Connect, one such was Wild Tangent's **Alex St John**, a co-creator of DirectX. He pooh-poohed perceived wisdoms about casual gamers – female and over 35 years old – by pointing out this is likely to be a product of mums using their credit cards to buy games for the kids.

"We're focusing more on hardcore players," St John explained, pointing to the popularity of Wild Tangent's RPG *Fate*. "Internally, we're now working on games with a budget of \$1 million to fulfil this demand." Of course, the company's model is rather different to others in the sector since its gameplay software comes installed on 65 per cent of all PCs sold in the US, giving it a direct channel to consumers. "We're like a virtual console for the PC," St John claimed.

Andrew Pederson, vice president and general manager of EA's Pogo, claimed his players averaged 57 minutes per day, almost three times as long as MySpace or Facebook users



The success of casual game portals has been noted by the likes of Facebook, which uses social competition as the bait for new users



TABLETOP GAMING

Let's be frank. Most gaming accessories are little more than tat – a goomba stitched on a wallet here, a lame Solid Snake outfit there. So it's a pleasure to come across something that not only tickles the nostalgia receptors, but is aesthetically pleasing to your inner Wallpaper* design Nazi. The people behind British tech and style blog Mostly This have designed two tables – one based on *Asteroids*, one on *Space Invaders* – and plan a limited production run of around 50 later this year, once they've prototyped and planned materials. Though if Ikea picks them up we might actually be able to afford one.

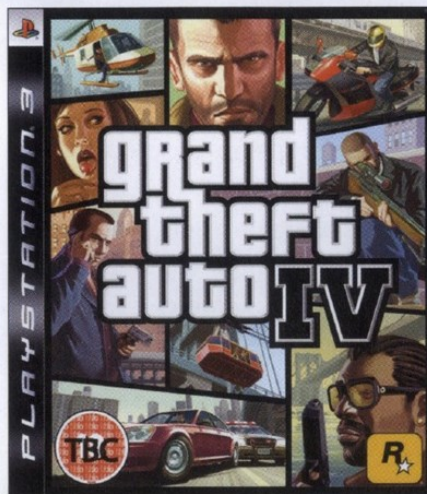
• www.mostlythis.com/post/24280689

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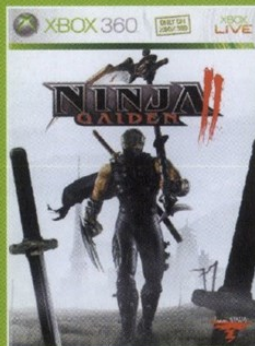


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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Facebreaker

FORMAT: 360, PS3, WII PUBLISHER: EA



With former head Kudo Tsunoda now at Microsoft, EA Chicago's *Fight Night* team delivers a sucker punch: a spiritual successor to *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing* with a knockout face-mapping feature

Silent Hill V

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: KONAMI



Dogs without faces, voluminous rooms, pin-sharp edges and no less fog: the latest screens suggest a game lost in the mists of the HD era. Would a little less clarity restore that sense of menace?

Red Faction Guerrilla

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3, PUBLISHER: THQ



As one Volition team embarks upon this, the other plugs away on *Saints Row 2*. We know which side we'd like to be on. The big question: will it be more like *Red Faction* or its (inferior) sequel?

Legendary

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: ATARI



'From the creator of *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty*' probably isn't the best sales pitch, but then neither is 'a full-scale war between man and myth'. For Atari's sake, it had better live up to its name

This Is Vegas

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: MIDWAY



It's a redneck rampage in Midway's free-roaming lifestyle game, promising bar-room brawls, underground street races, gambling and 'partying'. A Las Vegas fantasy in every sense of the word

Monster Lab

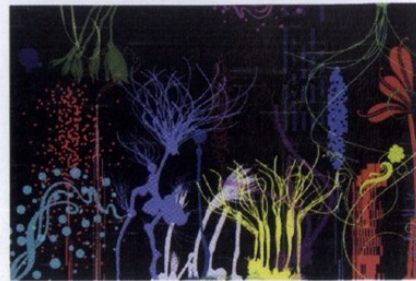
FORMAT: DS, WII PUBLISHER: EIDOS



Can Backbone Entertainment make the jump from Xbox Live portmaster to Nintendo thirdparty? Make your monster, scour the land and test it in combat in this colourful RPG actioner

PixelJunk Eden and Dungeons

FORMAT: PS3 PUBLISHER: SCE



Hot on the heels of the liberating *Monsters*, two titles announced at GDC. *Eden* (pictured) is a dreamlike, beautiful dash of gentle physics and item collection, *Dungeons* a top-down dungeon crawl

Boom Blox

FORMAT: MOBILE, WII PUBLISHER: EA



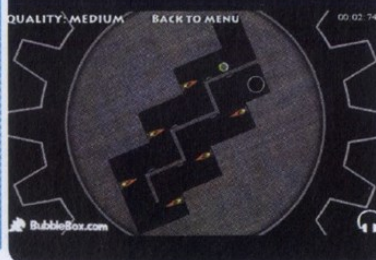
The first collaboration between Steven Spielberg and Westwood co-founder Louis Castle is literally a blockbuster. With over 300 levels, this physics-heavy party game could be tough to topple

Tiberium

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: EA



EA LA takes another shot at that elusive C&C FPS, hopefully with a better idea of how to release it on time. *Renegade* was a good multiplayer game; is it finally time to complete the package?



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Spin The Black Circle

Choosing this after last month's almost impossible web game, *Syobon Action*, makes us feel just a little bit like masochists. But there's something undeniably appealing about a game that doesn't pander to the demands of weak, silly fleshbags and demands machine-like levels of concentration to succeed.

Enter *Spin The Black Circle*, a simple one-screen puzzle game controlled by rotating a maze either left or right to get a ball to a goal. Simple in concept, simple in controls,

and something that makes you swear a great deal in practice. The game begins simply enough, but after a few levels the spike and flame dodging demands become quite something else.

The only thing is, it's always your fault for underestimating the momentum, or spinning the wrong way... and so you've just got to have another go. No wonder the development team refuse to accept responsibility for your becoming a homicidal maniac after playing.

onemorelevel.com/game/spin-the-black-circle

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NEXT
GENERATION

This month's guide to **Edge's** online home

Big developer interviews

During GDC, Next-Gen reporters sat down with some of the leading lights in game design. You can catch our interviews with Peter Molyneux and Bungie's CJ Cowan as well as full reports from the show's best sessions, including The iPhone and Gaming; The Next 20 Years of Games; The Future of Xbox Live; Secrets of *Wii Fit*; The Future of MMOs; and Development on *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.

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WORLD DEVELOPER LIST

A guide to the world's developers and the games they're working on right now
www.next-gen.biz/worlddevelopers

Know your roots

Remembering the titles that defined gaming

Next-Gen investigates the abiding influence of games designed and released during the 1980s, picking out the 50 games that are still making their presence felt today. From arcade classics to fledgling roleplaying and strategy games, we select and rank the titles that continue to, and maybe always will, influence game design.

The list includes the earliest games to appear on the PC, the profound influence of Nintendo's NES titles, the impact of the C64 and the glory days of the ZX Spectrum, when UK game designers arguably led the world in innovation.

Next-Gen's list, compiled by veteran game journalists from around the world, includes franchises that are still making waves, including *Super Mario Bros*, *SimCity*, *Final Fantasy*, *Prince Of Persia* and *The Legend Of Zelda*, as well as the fondly recalled likes of *Robotron*, *The Hobbit*, *Elite* and *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*.

We'll also be following up the feature with discussion on the reasoning behind the games that didn't get included.

www.next-gen.biz/1980s



EDGE CONTENT AND BLOG

If you've missed a recent issue of *Edge*, you can now head to Next-Gen to read and discuss a selection of features, reviews and previews from the magazine. And, on the *Edge* blog, you'll find extra interviews, reports and news that we can't fit on these pages. Recent entries include:

■ News and views from GDC, including interviews with *BioShock* designer Ken Levine and the team behind DICE's free-to-play *Battlefield Heroes* (see our preview on p43).

■ More from our interview with Rockstar's Sam Houser (see p60) in which he talks fantasy games.

■ Zen and the art of reloading: a look at how games represent the act of reloading weapons, from *Gears Of War*'s 'active' system to *Perfect Dark's* Cyclone.

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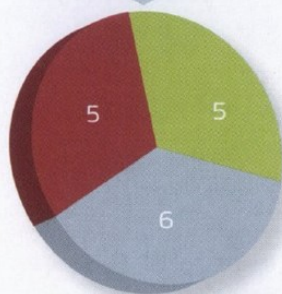
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Industry

FOCUS

Number of Sega releases by platform Q1 2008



360 ■
PS3 ■
Wii ■



Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games is an ongoing sales success for Sega, but it is still pushing more niche titles such as *Ghost Squad* and *Sega Bass Fishing*



In association with Screen Digest

Sega changes gear

After being relatively quiet at the end of 2007, Sega is aiming to make lots of noise in 2008, says Screen Digest analyst Piers Harding-Rolls

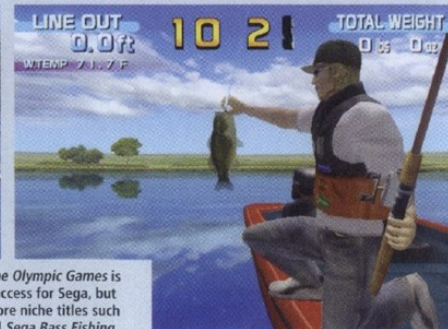
Analysis of publisher activity in the first quarter of 2008 has thrown up some interesting trends, not least Sega's intention to shift up a gear and take a significant share of console software sales in early 2008. Following a quiet end to the year from the Japanese publisher with only six game SKUs released across current consoles (albeit a release schedule that included the successful *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games* on Wii), Sega is looking to release 16 different console SKUs in the first three months of 2008. This release schedule makes Sega the most active publisher across console platforms so far in 2008, comprehensively out-producing the largest publishers such as EA, Activision and Ubisoft. As the graphs show, this is a significant change from the end of 2007.

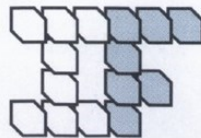
Sega Sammy's latest earnings release portrays a company that is under increasing financial pressure and struggling both in its arcade gaming and slot-machine divisions. With the arcade business undergoing restructuring and downsizing, it is partially left to Sega's retail games arm to help drive the company towards profitability by returning some of the last three years' worth of huge R&D investment in console games.

It would seem a missed opportunity, therefore, that all these releases are hitting the market after the Christmas quarter, where much of the retail games industry does its briskest business. While there may be some

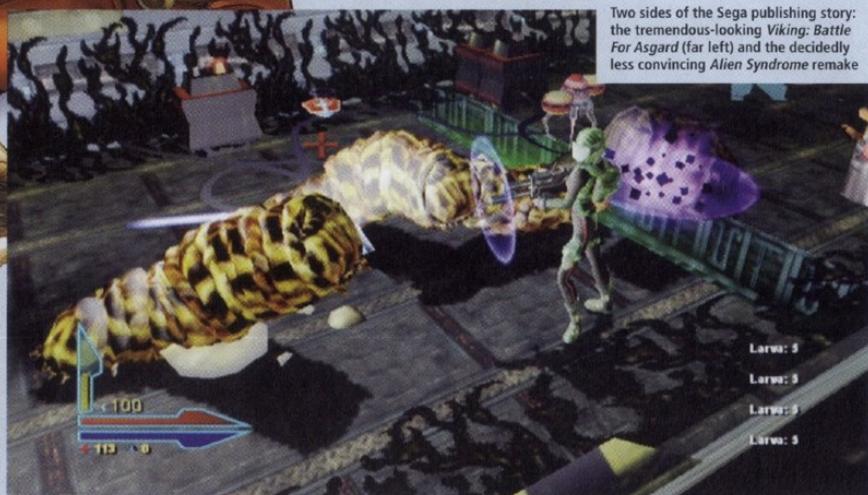
benefits to this schedule, namely less competition from other titles and a bigger installed base of games machines to aim for compared to pre-Christmas, it is unlikely that these factors will compensate for a missed Christmas sales season.

That issue aside, Sega appears to be grabbing the opportunity with open arms. For most publishers, the beginning of a console cycle represents a good time to introduce new IP. Not only are consumers eager to experience new games alongside established franchises on new platforms, but an early release gives publishers an opportunity to re-use technology and release sequels for those titles that show commercial promise. Out of the 16 SKUs that Sega is planning to release this quarter, 50 per cent are based on new IP and underline the





Two sides of the Sega publishing story: the tremendous-looking *Viking: Battle For Asgard* (far left) and the decidedly less convincing *Alien Syndrome* remake



company's aim to refresh its games portfolio and to build its IP assets. Even more impressive is that all of Sega's releases are based on original IP – a majority of which are owned by the company and highlight its formidable IP portfolio.

Sega's output demonstrates the 'two-tier' publishing strategy increasingly seen since early 2007 from a handful of publishers: big investments are made on high-definition consoles and games are often based on new

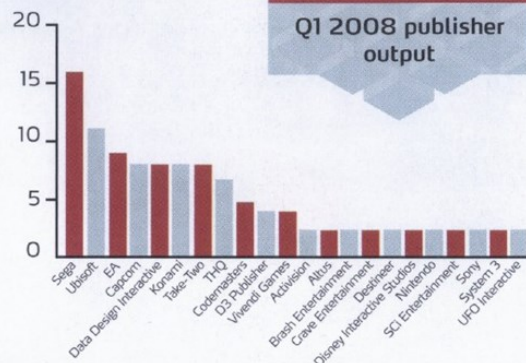
Indeed, examining the first quarter's release data shows that there are expected to be more games based on new IP on the 360 and PS3 than on the Wii. The substantial amount of fresh IP on both the Xbox 360 and (perhaps more strikingly) the PS3 suggests that multiplatform publishers now consider this a good moment to release new games on today's most powerful consoles. For those gamers seeking to experience the new, 2008 looks set to be a good year.

Sega's output demonstrates the 'two-tier' publishing strategy: big investments are made on high-definition consoles, while Wii's early strength is exploited with ports and remakes

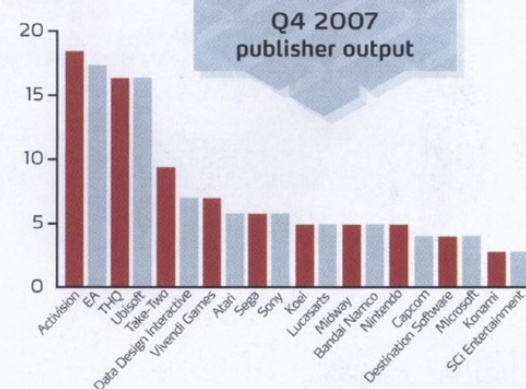
IPs (*Condemned*, *The Club*, *Viking: Battle For Asgard*), while Wii's early competitive strength is exploited with ports and remakes (*Alien Syndrome*, *House Of The Dead 2 & 3 Return*, *Ghost Squad*, *Nights: Journey Of Dreams*, *Sega Bass Fishing*). This situation has developed due to the fact that a number of publishers were unprepared for the success of the Wii and have been forced to fall back on their existing portfolio of content to release games on the platform within a respectable timescale. In addition, the graphical capabilities of the Wii are well suited to ports or remakes from established platforms such as PS2, even though they don't play to its unique capabilities.

Other publishers that have invested heavily in new IP for release in early 2008 include EA, Codemasters, Konami and Ubisoft – although none can match Sega's output. Although a significant percentage of these new IP releases are based on properties from other media sectors that have been licensed by publishers, there are also multiple titles based on entirely original IP. The introduction of new IP is of course more risky than churning out sequels, but IP ownership is the lifeblood of publishers and the ability to acquire or produce new and original IP affects the long-term commercial viability of these companies and the industry as a whole. As such, those companies that are active in introducing new and original IP to their portfolios are in fact building assets for a more successful future as well as keeping gamers interested in the medium.

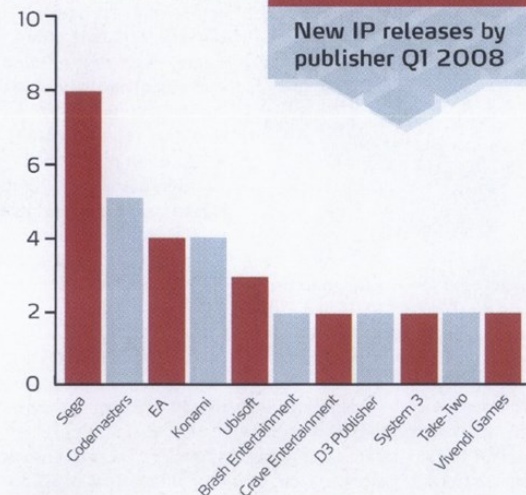
Q1 2008 publisher output



Q4 2007 publisher output



New IP releases by publisher Q1 2008





SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

The adventure continues

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on the death and life of the RPG



Remember when the RPG was the cornerstone of gaming in Japan? When games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* would sell a million copies at a time, one time after another? When even platform and fighting games took time out to cash in, with the likes of *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* and *Namco Vs Capcom?*

When the genre branched out into SRPGs like *Front Mission* and kid-focused RPGs like *Pokémon*? When levelling and looting were national pastimes?

To glance at the line-ups for Xbox 360 and PS3, you'd think these times were at an end. Sure, you have games like *Lost Odyssey*, *Folklore*, *Trusty Bell* and *Blue Dragon*, the last of which sold over 200,000 copies. That, on a machine with less than a two per cent market share in Japan! Square Enix, furthermore, must be expecting big things of its upcoming crop: the *Final Fantasy XIII* games, *Last Remnant* and *Shirokishi Monogatari* (known in the west as *White*

Knight Story). Then there's *Mass Effect*, which Microsoft hopes will become a blockbuster trilogy.

But these aren't just the biggest RPGs on home consoles, they're the *only* ones. And it isn't hard to see why. In its first week on release, Namco's *Trusty Bell* was at number two in the Japanese charts; in the second week, it was down at 34. On these powerful consoles, there's no such thing as a niche

Konami's *Gensou Suikoden*, Atlus' *Shin Megami Tensei*, Bandai's *.hack* and Banpresto's *Super Robot Taisen*. Now, what little you see of these is either rumour or the news of a delay or cancellation.

The situation on handhelds, though, couldn't be more different. Fans of *Dragon Quest* were stunned when its latest episode, *Dragon Quest IX: Hoshizora No Mamoribito*, was announced as a DS

On today's powerful consoles, there's no such thing as a niche any more - nowhere for a traditional adventure, with a deep story and limited freedoms, to make its money back. The situation on handhelds couldn't be more different

any more - nowhere for a traditional Japanese adventure, with its deep storyline and limited freedoms, to make its money back. Compare this to the period before the first PlayStation era, when 3D visuals were an attractive prospect, ripe with possibilities and low on risk, and you can see why some RPG fans are getting a bit depressed!

I remember when all the big names had an original RPG just around the corner: Nintendo's *Legend Of Zelda*, Namco's *Tales Of...* series,

exclusive. *Harvest Moon* has already made the jump to PSP, along with *Valkyrie Profile* and, as a port, *Disgaea*. A giant marketing campaign pushed *Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions* (again on PSP) to sell over 200,000 copies. And what's the biggest game on Sony's handheld? *Monster Hunter Portable 2*, a freeform RPG so popular not even *Wii Sports* could match it.

The prospect of having 22 million DS units sold in Japan, with development costs far more



Those white dragons don't stand a chance. But who's this Cloud fellow popping up in *FFIII*?

accessible than those of home consoles, is proving an irresistible lure for game makers. Now that this has spread to PSP, we're not only seeing remakes and ports, but original titles as well. A new generation of pocket-sized RPGs is being born, with new stories to tell, creatures to kill, treasures to find and worlds to explore. This half of the year is going to see many more, some already announced, others still a closely guarded secret. But I can't talk about those just yet!

Clearly, I'm not alone in thinking there are many gamers in Japan saying: "I can't afford PS3, but what's wrong with more PlayStation-style games?" To a large extent, these are the people who've driven PSP sales past the eight million mark. With Sony's handheld revived, the portable market is suddenly a dominating force in Japan, and potentially around the world. It reminds me of something Mr Miyamoto said recently, about the future of *Zelda* being more *Phantom Hourglass*, a handheld game, than *Twilight Princess*. So to people worrying about the RPG, don't panic, the adventure's just beginning.



Lost Odyssey's Kaim is immortal, but may be the last of a dying breed. *LO*'s long cutscenes seem more archaic than its mechanics



Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: February 18-24

Software (lifetime sales):

1. *Smash Bros X* (Nintendo, Wii): 77,880 (1,325,512)
2. *Sekaiju No Meikyuu II* (Atlus, DS): 75,574 (new entry)
3. *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, Wii): 71,057 (1,521,566)
4. *Musou Orochi* (Koei, PSP): 56,562 (new entry)
5. *Bokujou Monogatari Kirakira Taiyuu To Nakamatachi* (Marvelous Entertainment, DS): 39,390 (new entry)
6. *Winning Eleven Play Maker* (Konami, Wii): 36,511 (new entry)
7. *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* (Capcom, PS3): 22,167 (new entry)
8. *BioShock* (Spike, 360): 13,348 (new entry)
9. *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, Wii): 13,196 (2,763,561)
10. *Burnout Paradise* (EA Japan, PS3): 12,696 (new entry)

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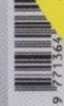


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Alone In The Dark



There's a game behind the tech demos! If the promises of an emergent horror game with physics toys and an open Central Park come to fruition, this could be a treat.

360, PC, PS2, PS3, Wii, ATARI

Fallout 3



It's smaller than *Oblivion* – but how much wasteland do you want? Besides, even paranoia is seductive when it mixes Terry Gilliam-esque cartoons with tragic disfigurement.

360, PC, PS3, BETHESDA

The Outsider



We didn't glimpse the open-world thriller when we visited Frontier, beyond an all-too-quick walk through its studio, but that's only made us keener to see more.

TBC, FRONTIER

Modding for the man

How can indies hit the mainstream and retain credibility?



Hailing from former mod-maker Splash Damage, *Quake Wars* was a fully professional game, retaining all the strengths of its forebear, *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, and yet adding enough polish and new ideas of its own to fulfil its need to act as a full-price, top-tier PC release

We can be sure about one thing: *Damnation* will prove better than the *Unreal Tournament* mod that spawned it. With professional budgets, a bigger, devoted team and greater experience behind it, there's no reason why it won't be more proficient and enjoyable.

But it will have lost much of the allure that surrounded the original mod. The romantic ideal of indie games and mods is profoundly attractive – egalitarian, creative, honest, authentic. These gifted amateurs do it for the love of it, for the respect and adulation of their peers. Or so the image goes. As a result, we're content to overlook the typically (and understandably) scrappy nature of the results.

Publishers and developers seem to have the same perception, seeing in amateur-made games a worthy and valuable source of ideas, and in their makers, talent. And they snap these noble makers up to reproduce their work for commercial release. The problem is that once in the big league, any charming connection with the amateur ethos is lost. It now has to shine on its own merits, with an audience ascribing new assumptions to it – a reasonable

budget, the aim of making money and the influence of marketing.

Damnation, for one, appears not to have come through the transition well, with a graphic style that apes an existing game, misrepresenting *Damnation's* individual characteristics in the process. *Frontlines*, meanwhile, which we reviewed last month, is perfectly competent but fails to achieve the same degree of appeal as the *Battlefield 1942* mod it originated as once did, partly because of the new singleplayer campaign, which dilutes its essential nature as a finely nuanced online multiplayer shooter.

If they're to break into the professional world and retain the same level of regard, mods and indie games must be developed carefully. *Portal*, for instance, is an extremely skilful progression from *Narbacular Drop*: Valve applied its experience and resources to a stellar idea, and it shone. And as amateurs gain new prominence with the public nature of XNA games, and *UT* mods on PS3, it's becoming more important that professional developers and publishers take more care to not lose the magic, but build on it instead.



32 **Metal Gear Online**
PS3

34 **Mirror's Edge**
360, PC, PS3



36 **Spore**
DS, MOBILE, PC



37 **Dead Space**
360, PC, PS3



38 **Damnation**
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Wii

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360, PS3

FORMAT: PS3
PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: TBC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E180



Corridors of power

The map design is inspired. The bombed-out towns and echoing factory complexes are visually low-key, but their architecture manages to be both complex and intuitive. There is an abundance of excellent sniping and hiding spots, great opportunities for drawn-out cat-and-mouse, and unusual features like a sunken foxhole covered with camouflage netting right in the middle of an open crossroads – a much more valuable spot than it sounds. Spawn points, flags and bases are placed with wit and cunning, bringing some surprising dynamics to simple game-types.

Metal Gear Online

Will Konami sneak into online gaming by the back door, or stumble through the front?

Selling an online shooter as a standalone product is a risky business at the best of times, and nowadays there aren't many who have the guts. Even the magnificent *Team Fortress 2* ended up bundled in *The Orange Box*, while those titans of the genre, *Quake* and *Battlefield*, are both opting for the ad-supported, free-to-play model for their next outings. And who can blame them? Singleplayer blockbusters like *Halo 3* and *Call Of Duty 4* are shipping with superb,

An afternoon's play reveals *Metal Gear Online* to be tight, finely balanced and well designed, with a refreshingly moderate pace and taut controls. Although many thirdperson shooters are FPSes in all but perspective, *MGO* is quite a different beast, a compelling hybrid that owes equal amounts to the frantic fracas of deathmatch games and the steady stealth of its singleplayer namesake. Its game types will be broadly familiar, but the slow running pace and daring inclusion of optional

Metal Gear Online is a compelling hybrid that owes equal amounts to the frantic fracas of deathmatch games and the steady stealth of its singleplayer namesake

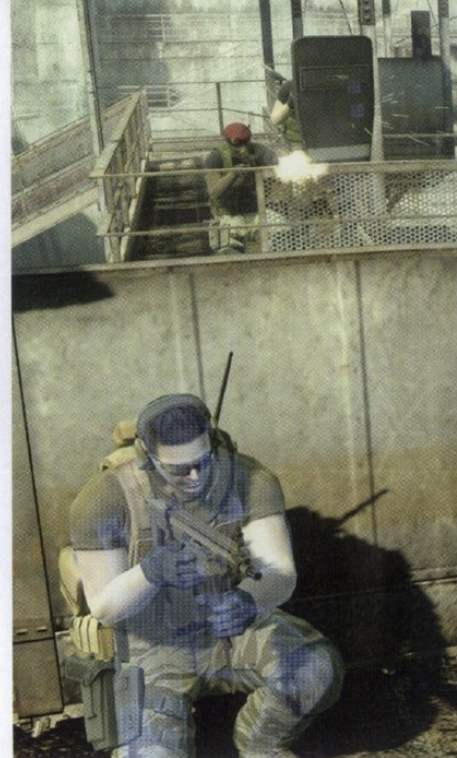
feature-laden online multiplayer modes that can quite easily dominate the playlists for years at a time.

So it's the cause of quite a few raised eyebrows that Konami is choosing to split *Metal Gear's* multiplayer game off from *Metal Gear Solid 4* and sell it on its own. What's more, *Metal Gear Online's* pedigree – the underwhelming multiplayer modes of *MGS3: Subsistence* and *Portable Ops* – is far from stellar. Is Konami simply stumbling in to the party far too late?

On quality, at least, we can be reassuring.

lock-on are more remarkable – and remarkably smart – inclusions.

The lock-on, which can be toggled on and off with a quick tap on square, is far less accurate than manual aiming, but very useful for untangling close-range and melee encounters at speed. It's balanced at the other end of the scale by a zoomed, firstperson aiming mode that roots you to the spot. Most players will use auto-aim less with time, but most will never abandon it completely; it provides accessibility, balance and long-term function without breaking the



game, and that's no mean feat. Likewise, the running pace initially seems rather languid, but it promotes stealth, caution and proper clearing of maps over run-and-gun glory, and is a crucial component of *Metal Gear Online's* unique flavour.

What is far from unique is the range of game types on offer at present. Deathmatch, team deathmatch, capture the flag, flag defence and base-capture modes all support 16 players, and are all largely as tradition dictates. Well, not quite. There's the typically absurdist Kojima touch of replacing flags with a rubber duck and frog that bob cheerfully above their possessor's heads, and announce their capture with a quack or croak. Furthermore, in both free-for-all CTF and turnabout flag defence, they aren't placed at player bases but at neutral spots on the map, equidistant from the teams' spawn points, and they can be tracked on the map at all times. One map also bucks conventional wisdom by having the teams' goals close to each other in the centre, to furiously hard-fought, see-sawing results.

Assault rifles tended to dominate in our session – unsurprising for beginners, perhaps – but the weapon loadouts feature plenty of interesting alternatives to the usual fare, including *Metal Gear* signatures like tranquilliser guns, specialist gentlemen's photography magazines, cardboard boxes and the highly adaptable and useful smoke and chaff grenades. Your effectiveness with all of these will be dictated by the four skills you select when creating your character: as well as proficiencies with all item types, these include the likes of improved lock-on and run speed. There's a broad selection and they level up over time, providing a simple but flexible platform for character specialisation.



There are no health packs, and no recharging; once you lose health, you're not getting it back until a respawn. This keeps the tempo up and avoids overly conservative play



Balaclavas, goggles, gas masks and Kevlar body armour feature heavily in the costuming options for your avatar. The armour is cosmetic, though – it's your character's skill development that will affect your performance



An early instinct is to head to the rooftops, but such vantage points usually expose you as much as others. Lying low on a carefully chosen gangway is an excellent sniping option

You can also customise your appearance, although with the default options it was difficult to make anything but a cool, serious and inconspicuous military man.

Increasingly, character customisation and persistence are the keys to success in online gaming, and although it's hard to tell from a brief playtest, Konami seems to be well aware of this. If it can match it with strong community support and a steady drip of new content, *Metal Gear Online* is a solid proposition. The only question hangs over distribution. We were told to expect a standard boxed release, but it also seems that a 'starter' pack will be bundled with *Metal Gear Solid 4*. If this could be fleshed out to the full game via downloadable content, *Metal Gear Online* could become a hit in the way that suits it best – by stealth.



Like its singleplayer cousin, *Metal Gear Online* is not an immediately spectacular game. But its understated looks – all gritty textures, cool monochromes and sharp edges – are pure PlayStation, and perfectly realised

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DICE
ORIGIN: SWEDEN
RELEASE: 2008
PREVIOUSLY IN: E178

Mirror's Edge

Taking a tumble with DICE's extraordinary action game

The firstperson perspective should mean something. That's the message you can take from *Mirror's Edge*, Digital Illusions' 'character-based action game'. It's a mixing of the thrills of thirdperson violence from the eyes of your character: even when quick-punching or slide-kicking your way through a totalitarian regime, or double-jumping across a grim corporate skyline, that firstperson view never breaks. In *Mirror's Edge*, it appears that your context is everything.

So: the context. The game takes place in a city under authoritarian regime. The city is comfortable and peaceful. But non-conformists of any shape or political shade are routinely criminalised, deported or imprisoned. With all electronic communication routinely monitored, organisation of resistance sits in the hands of couriers, runners like player character Faith.

And running is the first problem. Few games dare give their characters the weight and momentum of a human, few dare simulate. Instead, the best we get is flashy animation systems like *Assassin's Creed*, in which Altaïr can spin on the spot without complaint. No firstperson shooters bother; from Samus to Gordon Freeman, movement is simply a case of changing the position of the camera.

Which is why, initially, *Mirror's Edge* is so

Doors aren't opened, but barged through at speed. Corners are whipped around, and oblivious guards are tumbled as Faith slides, taking their legs from under them

dizzying. Not disorientating, but dizzying in the way that your brain begins to process the potential and starts enjoying the rolling, fleet-foot chases.

Owen O'Brien, *Mirror's Edge*'s senior producer, begins his demonstration with the heroine standing on the edge of a skyscraper, high above the city, an almost infinite vertical between Faith and her ultimate destination – a comms tower where she's to pass on a rucksack of critical communiqués. That's fine: Faith just runs up to the edge of a red-hued crane, and slides down. As she reaches the end she leaps, somersaults and lands, still rolling, preserving her momentum. Faith is still running.

The next problem: fences and pipes, the machinery of the modern city. Faith doesn't stop. By pressing down she slides. Pressing up helps her latch on. At full sprint, she needs little coaxing or twitchy stabs at the

pad. All movement is controlled by just a few simple button presses. The pipes are simple – they're ducked. The fences are leaped. A long gap is barely thought about – O'Brien simply wall-runs Faith across the edge without pause. It looks simple and utterly liberating – a long, long way beyond the jumping puzzles and crate shifting to which we're so accustomed.

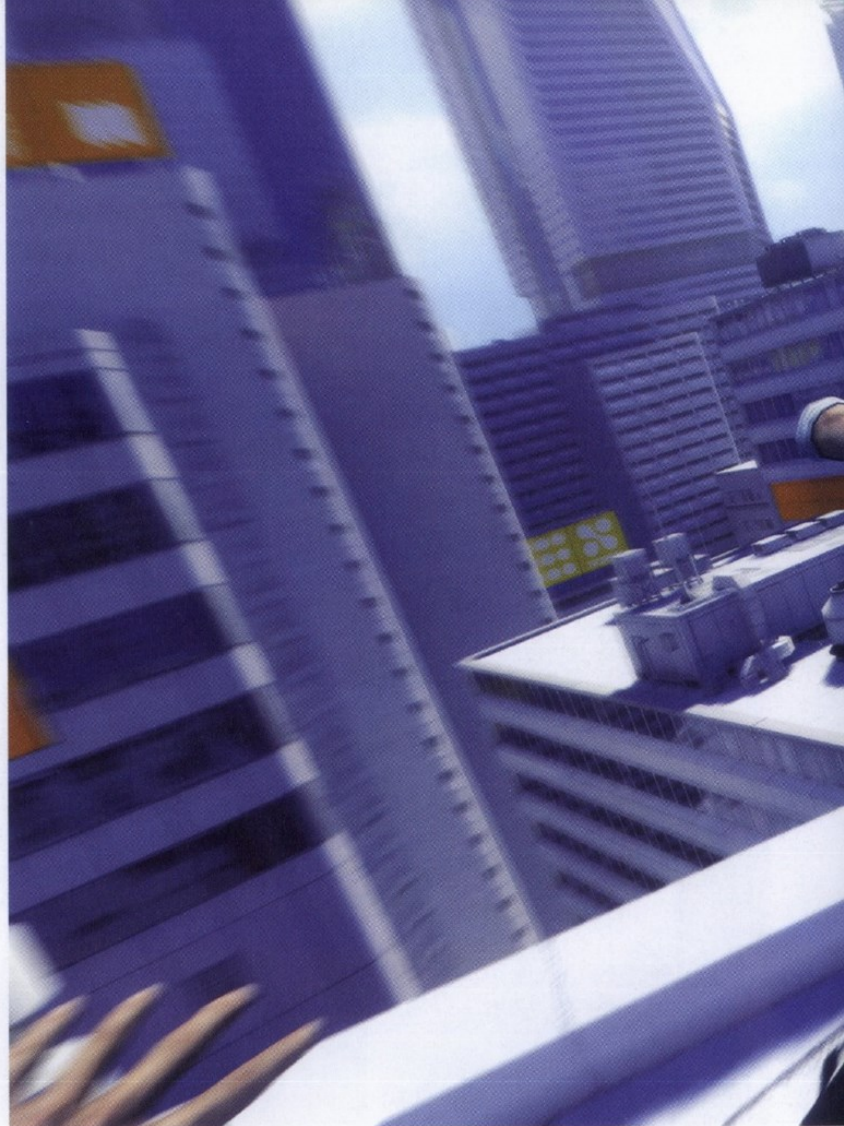
Faith's progress is helped by two simple visual cues. Items that are useful, like ledges or outcropping machinery, are marked in red. The rest of the world is seen in a cool white or blue. Where you want to go, or what you want to use, dramatically stands out. O'Brien explains that the inspiration for the palette came from cinema. "We looked at the Bourne films. Bourne sees the world differently. Where the rest of us sees a pen, he sees a lethal weapon," he says. Where we see ledges, Faith sees routes.

The second cue? "Runner Vision." O'Brien pauses. "TM," he clarifies. "It's our version of bullet-time. It's useful for better timing your jumps and handholds." As he talks, Faith takes a running jump, across yet another vertiginous gap. At the last possible moment, as a news helicopter circles, Runner Vision activates. O'Brien slams up. Faith grabs out on to a drainpipe, which wobbles but holds. Held breaths are gently exhaled.

Faith starts running again. But the news 'copter has alerted the authorities. It's now time for Faith to fight. O'Brien describes *Mirror's Edge* as a "full-body experience, not a firstperson shooter". That's why Faith doesn't carry a weapon – she can pick up guns from the fallen, but most of the time she'll fight with her fists and instincts. It's as much fleeing the violence as it is inflicting it. As she rounds a corner, she's spotted. Five police officers turn, their guns trained. "Don't you dare move. Don't come closer," one yells.

O'Brien looks around. He's not approaching them, and they're holding back. There is another pause, as the standoff

DICE refuses to be drawn on questions of multiplayer. "There is another element of the game outside singleplayer that we are working on, but it isn't multiplayer" is O'Brien's infuriatingly cryptic answer





The longer momentum is maintained by chaining moves, the more Runner Vision is awarded – which aside from looking swish helps you to place your feet accurately during the game's trickier sections



Hitting it off

"We've worked a lot more on the melee system," producer Tom Farrer explains to us. "First we made it more complicated, didn't like it, and took it back down and built the depth into the context basis of it. We wanted to make it much more like the movement system, so that all the different attacks are dependent on your movement."

"There's now a much greater element of skill; I think before it was pretty much if you hit the melee button you would hit the enemy – now you have the ability to miss or make mistakes."

develops. Then, a flurry of action. A staircase is leaped, rounds ping off the bannister, and Faith flees. Doors aren't opened, but barged through at speed. Corners are whipped around, and oblivious guards are tumbled as Faith slides, taking their legs from under them. The chase is on.

One guard manages to land a shot – Faith's vision blurs and she stumbles for a moment, as if she's been punched. O'Brien guides her around a balcony and doubles back to swiftly kill the guard, steal his gun and then coolly execute his partner.

Even so, Faith has run out of skyscraper. There are no further ledges to leap to, no ground to cover, just empty air and a long drop. The guards are closing in, the helicopter gleefully circling. Bullets ping off the stairwell O'Brien is using as cover. Then a solution presents itself. The chopper gets a little too close. Faith turns and sprints. She takes another bullet but keeps running. She jumps... The collective audience, drunk on emotion as well as booze, gasps. One hand reaches for the skids, and connects. Faith has escaped.



FORMAT: DS, MOBILE, PC
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: MAXIS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: SPRING
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E164, E181

Spore

Has a game emerged from Will Wright's primordial soup?



At the cellular level, your creature gains evolutionary upgrades each time it consumes a certain amount of genetic material. It's intelligent design rather than Darwin – you soon realise it's good to be an omnivore



On a mission from God

During the Civilisation phase, your objective is to become the dominant culture on the planet, asserting yourself militarily, philosophically or economically. Initially you are only able to choose one of these methods, but as you conquer other cities you can exploit their cultural toolset. Slightly disappointingly, the first two of these options operate almost identically, with you assaulting an enemy city with hi-tech preaching equipment, just as you would shell it were you militaristic. This leads to some brilliant visualisation, however: one means of spreading the word is to project a giant raving hologram at the enemy city's outskirts.



Spanning four phases of life from the microscopic to the cosmic, there was always the risk that *Spore* would sacrifice depth in each section for the scale of its overall scope. Even after an hour of hands-on with *Spore*, the detail of its epic tale of evolution becomes little clearer. This is partly to the game's credit; inevitably the glorious (but already much discussed) creature creation tools act as a vast time-sink, permitting only short glimpses into the meat of the actual gameplay.

Things were sped along a little by the ability to drop into the game at any phase of play. No longer do you need to crawl out of the ocean before you set up a tribe – Maxis found that many playtesters simply wanted to leap to their preferred stage of development straight away and start creating. But *Spore*'s concession to the sandbox is undercut by the fact that not all tools and technologies are available to you when you start a section. The space-exploration stage requires you to fulfil a fairly



linear series of missions before the more exciting terraforming tools and other creative outlets are unlocked. The missions we accepted were of no particular complexity – little more than introductions to the tools. However, producer **Thomas Vu** insists that as the space section progresses, players will be required to employ some strategic thought, culminating in an 'ultimate quest' which determines victory. Indeed, this final section of the game is far more involved than its predecessors, which will last between one-and-a-half and three hours each depending on how much time you put into



The modelling tools make it simple to create sophisticated vehicles and hideous creatures, but it takes a little more effort to texture and paint your creation – the presets often produce clunky results

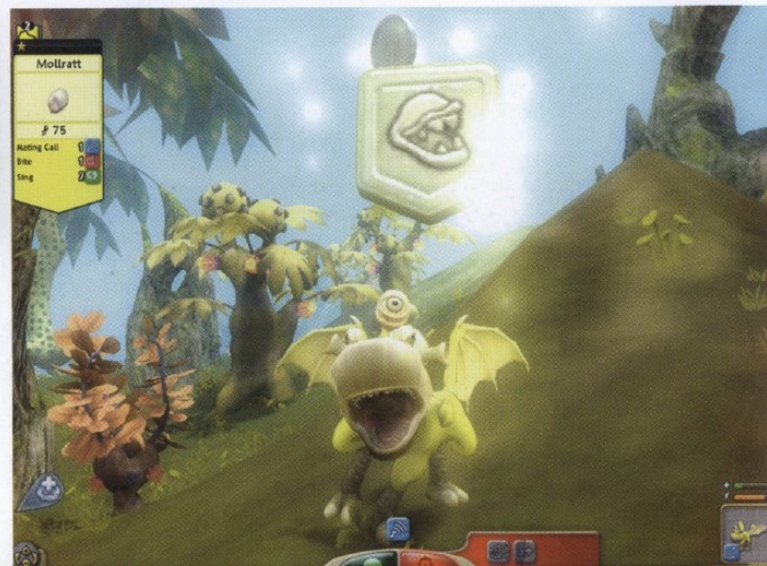
editing your creations. The game's complexity scales along with your organism, it seems.

Previous stages we played, such as the Civilisation section, required a limited RTS style of play, but Maxis has clearly tried to ensure that it remains as accessible as possible. "We struggled with how deep we wanted to make these games and how long they should be," says Vu. "We worked closely with Will Wright on this, and Will really wanted to make the first four of those phases very casual. But though we don't want to make the Civilisation phase the deepest RTS ever, we still want players to feel satisfied by it."

Nonetheless, *Spore* can prove challenging – Vu refers to several difficulty settings and you could conceivably see some interesting interaction between the various classes of culture you can choose from (see 'On a mission from God'). Despite this potential, it's difficult to shake the feeling that *Spore* isn't certain whether it wants to be a toy or a game – and the compromised structure may be too simple to satisfy gamers, and too restrictive for those who just want to splash paint on the canvas.



Although much of the game doesn't have the same visual impact it did when first announced, the space conquest section still wows with its scale, allowing you to pull the view all the way out to galactic level





With the hull breached, Isaac's suit takes care of life-support duties – for a short time. In the vacuum, all the player can hear is Isaac's breathing, which makes for a particularly unnerving sensory experience



Dead Space

EA takes survival horror into the depths of space, and proves more resourceful than we had any right to expect

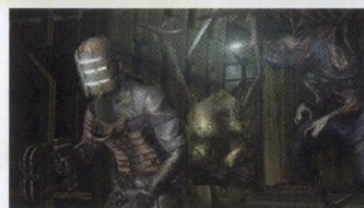
We've approached it differently," says **Glen Schofield**, executive producer of *Dead Space*. "We built a few mechanics first, the main character, the weapons, and created one polished level and tested the hell out of it. Now, with the mechanics in place, we've got teams working exclusively on the main character, for example, or the puzzles. In many of the games I've worked on we've had plenty of features – but we've never gone that deep into them. This time we've decided to focus on just a few and really polish them".

Schofield's not wrong. *Dead Space* is polished – ticking all the boxes you'd expect to be ticked by 'Resident Evil on a spaceship'. Gunmetal corridors, steel-mesh floors, bulkheads and wheezing mechanised doors – every element popularised by Ridley Scott's *Alien* and shamefully regurgitated by Event Horizon (not to mention Hollywood's innumerable poor cousins) is on display here, though in surprisingly good order.

Churlish? Perhaps. After all, what (if not a

gloomy deep-space industrial facility) should we expect from two kilometres of mining vessel? And in fairness, aesthetically there's plenty to admire. In contrast to, say, *Mass Effect's* cookie-cutter interiors, *Dead Space's* rooms and corridors have an air of genuine functionality and, consequently, believability – less like spaces for the benefit of a game and more like areas in which the Ishimura's absent or mutated crew could well have worked. It's a sensibility which extends to the design of Isaac Clarke's upgradeable, heavy-duty mining suit – which not only displays a reading for his stock of air and health, but can also project video and images (as well as inventory and mission logs) a foot in front of his face – negating the need for a HUD. It's a positive, reassuring start.

The best-realised of all of *Dead Space's* features, however, is that of 'strategic dismemberment'. Far from just a grizzly cosmetic gimmick, choosing your target carefully has tactical implications. Cut the head off a scythe-limbed Slasher, for



Being a mining vessel, there's little in the way of military hardware. The weapon set consists of tools, cutting lasers, saws and violently hammering projectile weapons

example, and you'll have to deal with a wildly flailing, unpredictable enemy. Shoot off its arms and it may charge and attempt to bite you, while cutting off the legs will see it advancing on its belly, slowing it but making it a tougher target to finish in the process. Using your modest resources, along with the dismemberment, is key to your survival. Players with only one shot remaining may be able to lop off a limb and, using the TK gun (not entirely dissimilar to *Half Life 2's* gravity gun), turn the sharp, severed limb on its former owner to remove its legs.

There are concerns, however. On the evidence of what we've seen so far – an hour of visceral combat against relentless alien encounters – *Dead Space* feels more *Doom* than *Silent Hill*. Will this be the primary focus? "Not at all," reassures Schofield. "This has been to show you some of the mechanics – we also have more 'psychological' areas... You may go 20 minutes without an encounter... but we want you to be scared shitless within that 20 minutes."



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
(EA REDWOOD SHORES)
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: WINTER



Grand designs

The cavernous interior of the Ishimura allows for sprawling, non-linear levels. Of particular note are the ship's grander spaces, such as a centrifugal chamber which needs reactivating to restore gravity. Here, Clarke must manoeuvre himself using magnetic boots to cling to surfaces, while employing a stasis field to slow rotating machinery so it can be pulled, using his TK Gun, into the correct position – a spatial puzzle which amply demonstrates both scale and ambition.

Melee attacks provide an excellent means of conserving ammunition. Grounding the more nimble aliens with a shot will give players an opportunity to kick, or stamp, them into submission





FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: BLUE OMEGA
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: Q4 2008



Damnation

Of mods and mimicry in a steampunk old west

Gears Of War has proved a lot more influential than most might ever have expected. Its cover system and controls, its implementation of co-op, its grim aesthetic, even the little things like the relocation of reloading to a bumper, have been readily absorbed into swathes of other games. And, on first impression at least, *Damnation* has lifted great sections of it. Its tech-gothic and flying viscera visual style is almost identical, and since *Damnation* uses Unreal Engine 3 it exhibits the same gritty sheen, though it lacks *Gears*' polish and detail. The player character carries a similar loadout of four weapons, while presentation shares the peculiar timbre of *Gears*' sound effects, its typefaces and HUD design, and many aspects of its control system.

That initial comparison is less than useful



Though not yet shown, *Damnation* will also feature vehicles, and will offer some choice over their use, though they'll come in handy traversing the game's vast expanses of terrain



for understanding *Damnation*, however, because beyond its nature as a thirdperson shooter it's very different. Indeed, it's a direct successor to an *Unreal Tournament 2004* mod that was applauded for its originality (netting itself second place in Nvidia's Make Something Unreal contest, in fact), and produced by a developer that includes that mod's 12-strong core team.

The key difference is in its environments – they're not the tightly linear passages of *Gears*. Set in a world called The Sovereignty, a thematically bizarre mix of gothic arches, western badlands and futuristic industrialism, the environments are much more expansive. A section demoed by lead designer **Jacob Minkoff** and producer Richard Gilbert opens on one side of an enormous ravine, across from a town under bombardment by an enemy army. The objective is to find a way to cross the ravine, enter the town and meet with allied troops on the far side of a vast cast iron bridge. Given the lack of a map or compass, studying the view to work out how to reach the town and make your way up to the bridge is crucial to working out where the path is.

A second difference is that player character Captain Hamilton Rourke, a member of a group of rebels called The Peacemakers, has more in common with Lara Croft than Marcus Fenix. Aside from his gun skills he's highly agile, able to

perform wall-jumps and spectacular leaps. Once in the town, Rourke must climb up various shelled buildings to access the bridge. The team claims that environments will boast multiple routes through them, with some allowing players to largely avoid combat – the choice, they say, will be the player's. "We're taking the FPS and going vertical," says Minkoff. "We want to evolve the FPS genre, to get FPS players to enjoy the acrobatics that action-adventure players enjoyed for years."

Combat itself is fast paced, perhaps owing much to the game's *UT* roots, and with no cover move, dodging and strafing are key. Enemies will exhibit similar acrobatic capabilities to Rourke's, but his special power, bestowed by a touch of Native American mysticism, means that he can see enemies through walls to plan attacks. Currently, however, the AI doesn't seem to warrant it, with them simply running straight at the player until they drop.

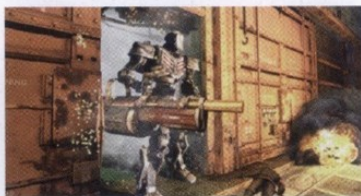
With somewhat rudimentary animation, combat and environmental design, even given the scale at which they're presented, there's much work to be done on *Damnation* before it meets the potential of its concept. On top of that, its superficial resemblance to *Gears Of War* will do the novelty of its premise few favours. A little more self-confidence, however, and this could be something special.



Movie rushed

Damnation is the first game property for Blue Omega, a production company with a couple of horror B-movies, *Dark Ride* and *Danika*, to its name, and a subsidiary, oddly, of a company called Heavy Hammer that deals in real estate data.

Damnation's producer, **Richard Gilbert**, sees much potential in videogames, telling us: "Games are fantastic for their longer length than movies to tell epic stories, and they're more economically viable to do." But should they just be seen as a way of delivering stories? This also makes us wonder about the speed at which companies from outside games, like Blue Omega, are rushing into making them – in this case, by snapping up modders.



In all sections, players will be accompanied by an AI buddy, an extraordinarily inappropriately dressed woman who acts as the host for offline drop-in-drop-out co-op



It's hard to create a sense of freshness around the concept of 'aliens versus marines', but *Resistance* does make its alien foes somewhat more than generic, and authentically gruesome



Resistance 2

It's the US this time, so no religious outcries or gun cri... Oh, hold on...

Resistance: Fall Of Man was Insomniac's first stab at making an FPS. Though it felt bold and confident, buoyed perhaps by the developer's experience of producing riotously ballistic amusements in *Ratchet And Clank*, it failed to truly stand apart from games made by more practised studios, the likes of Infinity Ward and Bungie, perhaps. And though its arsenal was inventive, its scenarios rarely demanded its mastery beyond headshots and melee.

What it did do was build sturdy foundations for a sequel. *Resistance 2* (a working title) is set two years after the original's unsuccessful defence of Britain, with the Chimera beginning a pincer air assault on the east and west coasts of America: the game once again puts you in the mutated shoes of Sergeant Nathan Hale, points you in the direction of some toothy foes, and says 'get cracking'.

The singleplayer mode will try to create huge set-pieces around the air invasion of the USA, and the emphasis in the little that has been revealed thus far has been on scale, one of the original's better



Larger opponents can't be beaten by just emptying a clip, and will be a big feature of the Chimera. It'll be hard to beat landing on Scarabs with a Mongoose jump, though



The invasion of America comes from both sides, and you'll move from the rural midwest to cities of high commerce. One of the original's best features was its sense of place, particularly a snowy London, so expect some beautiful recreations

achievements. Enemy-wise, there will be a greater emphasis on larger foes, including Goliaths in much larger numbers, while basic Chimera have undergone an armour and fierceness upgrade. Among the new recruits, the Chameleon stands out, an invisible and ferocious close-combat specialist that will move behind your position and only decloak when just about to attack.

Insomniac has also offered hints about what it calls a 'scalable AI system' that will be used to manage the large numbers of enemies present onscreen at any one time. In essence, the enemies closest to the player will use co-ordinated attacks and clever dodging behaviour, while those further away will follow slightly more basic modes of offence. As well as this AI system, there will also be a limited amount of randomised content in the game's levels. How this will be incorporated into the larger picture, to be more than a novelty but less than a potential game-breaker, is yet to be shown, however.

In what is fast becoming de rigueur for any serious FPS, *Resistance 2* will also feature

a separate co-op campaign that can be played through with anything up to eight players. This will have a separate story that interweaves with the singleplayer mode, and will concentrate on squads working through objective-driven levels: take out that bridge, repel this assault, get that man out of the power station.

The straight-up multiplayer is simpler, and goes straight for the jugular: it will support up to 60 players at any one time, all divided into smaller squads fighting on the same map – each with their own objective and balance of character classes. Given the original's maximum support was for 40 players, this could be a powerful boast as Sony looks to convince gamers of PSN's ability to rival Xbox Live – though achieving a multiplayer balance to rival the likes of *COD4* and *Halo 3* with those numbers will be a significant challenge. Clearly we'll need to spend a little more time with *Resistance 2* before forming a firm opinion, but in terms of ambition it's one of the PS3's strongest titles of the year.



FORMAT: PS3
PUBLISHER: SCE
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: AUTUMN



I want to be a macho man

As *Halo 3* demonstrated, online co-op is one of the most enjoyable additions to the FPS genre in years. *Resistance 2* is aiming to take this further by not only making the co-op campaign separate, but also by incorporating something along the lines of *COD4*'s perks system. Your character can specialise in one of three classes to begin with: soldier, medic or special ops (who comes with a sniper rifle). Each has their own upgrade path and special abilities that are, interestingly enough, charged by killing enemies – so no hiding in the background. The more you play, the more abilities you get – setting the stage for the inevitable co-op score attack.

FORMAT: WII
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: GEARBOX
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: SUMMER

Samba De Amigo

Sega's second-favourite monkey makes a welcome return – but will shaky controls mean shaky controls?



The visuals have lost none of their bright and vivid appeal, while the game's soundtrack is promised to contain new tracks alongside many of the old ones

It's one of gaming's oddest couplings in recent years: Sega's beloved

Mexican monkey rhythm-action star is making a long-overdue comeback in a title developed by Gearbox, the creator of the *Brothers In Arms* series and a developer more famous for machine guns than maracas.

Those wishing that this strange alchemy may mint equally bizarre gameplay will have to pin their hopes for a rhythm-based FPS elsewhere, however. Even though Sega has yet to reveal track details or minigames, *Samba De Amigo* seems likely to be an expanded updating of the Dreamcast and arcade title rather than a sequel that moves into genuinely new territory. And, given the affection fans hold for the original, it makes sense that Gearbox is adopting a strategy of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' for Sega's series.

The problem may be, however, that perhaps something is broken, after all. Not the concept itself, of course – a quick playthrough of the slim one-song preview level proves that the dancing monkey and his spongy, cartoon world have lost little of their

initial appeal. Instead, potential trouble lies with worrying indications that the Wii Remote and Nunchuk are not quite up to the task of the original game's bundled maracas. More specifically, the current preview build reveals intermittent problems detecting which of the six onscreen spots the player's 'maracas' are occupying, while, on occasion, the game struggles with disentangling a movement to a new position from an actual shake.

There's still room to remedy such problems, however, with both Sega and Gearbox stressing that the current code is not optimised, and that the control scheme is their top priority for the coming months. Equally, there are unconfirmed reports of plans for a maracas peripheral of some kind to ship with the finished game. With a lot of work still to do, time will show if pressure to hit a summer release date makes *Samba* another victim of Wii's often loose controls, ending up alongside *Prince Of Persia* and *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* – solid games, once whole, but now gently broken.



Intriguingly, rumours suggest that it was Gearbox that approached Sega with the idea of updating *Samba*. This hopefully bodes well for the game's quality, although it may also hint at the difficulties independent developers now face in getting big new projects off the ground

Sega Bass Fishing

The Remote and Nunchuk fill the space of yet another cherished peripheral as Sega casts off once more



FORMAT: WII
PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: ARC SYSTEMS WORKS
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: MARCH



The bass seemed to be a little slower on the uptake than before in the sample levels we played, although it may be Sega's pioneering work on fish AI making them too smart to fall for our lures

Those looking for a game that's finally brave enough to shake up the staid and complacent world of the bass fishing simulator, overturning established practices and bringing bloody revolution to the land of snares and night-crawlers, can look away now. Those hoping for a thoughtful repackaging of a Dreamcast favourite can breathe a sigh of happiness, however: *Sega Bass Fishing* is back, and from the blue skies and green reeds through to the tinfoil-soft rock soundtrack, there's very little that feels unfamiliar.



As expected, the Remote and Nunchuk appear to be a perfectly acceptable solution to the lack of a bespoke rod. Choosing a spot via the thumbstick, and casting and shaking with flicks of the Remote, all work intuitively, although reeling in with the Nunchuk lacks a little of the precision and feedback of the original controller. Visually, the game has received the most modest of graphical upgrades, with character (and fish) models a little kinder on the eyes, and more elaborate foliage and backdrops.

Sega has padded out the package with new lakes and new types of bass and snares. The biggest addition comes in the form of the new Nature Trip feature, which allows a range of different seasons, times of day and weather conditions to affect the dispersal patterns and behaviour of the fish in a more varied alternative to the Arcade mode.

Benefiting from the near-universal goodwill felt for Dreamcast software, *Sega Bass Fishing* looks to be a gentle, well-meaning revision. It's unlikely to provide a huge splash, but the sheer nostalgia will be lure enough for many.



Street Fighter IV

Capcom sets one thing straight at the AOU Show: if you build it, they will come back

The scene couldn't have been at greater odds with the tentative origins of *Street Fighter IV*. Chun-Li cosplayers courted the queues, patrons sat goggle-eyed at the first playable machines, and, in an AOU Show thick with fighting games, the hall echoed with the sounds of spinning bird kicks and hundred-hand slaps. After ten years, the church of *Street Fighter* was open again for the faithful.

Readers of *E185* will know much of what was shown: a six-button layout, familiar fights, an efficient new reversal called the Saving Attack, and a fetching shader that combines accented brush strokes with traditional cel-shading. Freed of painting every last pixel of every frame of animation, Capcom has touted this as the most fluent, emotive, naturally cartoony *Street Fighter* yet – and for good reason.

In taking to the stage for an intro, producer Yoshinori Ono described the vision of series creator Yoshiki Okamoto: of a beat 'em up parody that evolved into one of the most popular, competitive games in history. That vision is the driving force behind the new game's look, its entrance and victory sequences as overblown as its characters' forearms. With sessions limited to ten consecutive wins, no one really had time to acquaint themselves with this, most contenting themselves with the utterly faithful hit-boxes, move-sets and pace.

In a line-up of favourites, among them Zangief, Blanka, Chun-Li and Guile, Ryu and Ken were the obvious favourites, the dark horse being Dhalsim and his treacherous ability to warp about the screen. Between them, they left little doubt as to the game's

classic balance of agility, power, attack and defence; in what's fast becoming a trite observation, this was at heart the same old *Street Fighter II*. The overwhelming urge to revisit rather than explore meant that few used new characters Abel and C Viper, which was a shame considering these two MMA fighters give the best insight into a delicately modernised dynamic.

A faster, more aggressive and, above all, French version of Zangief, Abel mixes pro-wrestling with traditional martial arts. C Viper is a supersonic striker with a curious love of aerial elbow drops – and an immediate hit with those who dared select her. So tuned are the newcomers to the game's boisterous animation that they, more than any of the original World Warriors, make you comfortable with the new



The old tradition of choosing a character based on that of your opponent lives on, many at AOU Show using the sly Chun-Li to counter C Viper's fierce aerial attacks

aesthetic. Still, there was fun to be had in watching the traditionalists – most of the audience, it seemed – wrestling with their loyalty to those ancient pixels.

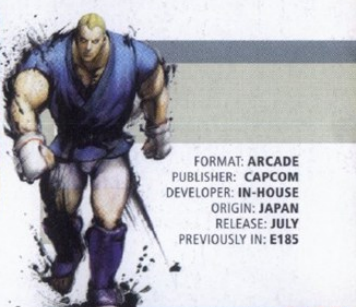
For a trade show debut, it was a rigorous test. As players explored the available stages, particularly an airfield full of taxiing jets and patrolling jeeps, the occasional glitch saw characters clip through the 3D props. Was it out of keeping with a game still in beta? Enough to spoil this stunning renovation? Of course not. For a fighter out of retirement, *SFIV* handled superbly at AOU Show – and this was just the sparring session.



Despite claims that successive jumping, ever the cheapest of *Street Fighter's* attack options, would be nullified in *SFIV*, there was plenty of it going on in Tokyo. Whether this dirty habit becomes a reliable tactic, however, remains to be seen



You might not think it at first, but the facial expression tied to each classic move is the same as in *Street Fighter II*, the only change being the game's more flexible anatomies



FORMAT: ARCADE
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: JULY
PREVIOUSLY IN: *E185*



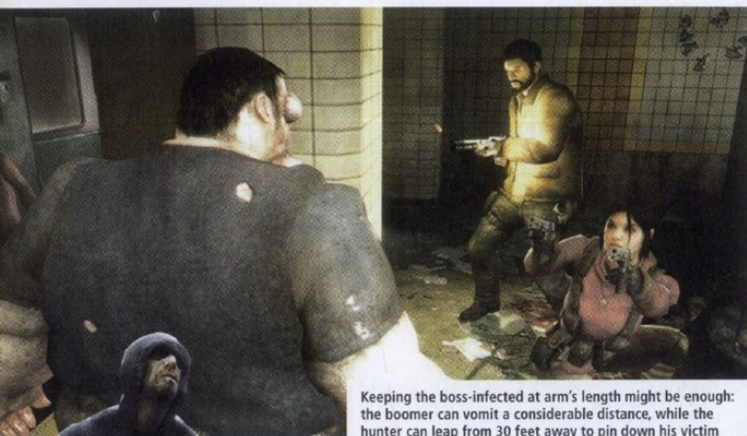
Card fighters

SFIV's entry into the IC Card arena is far from token, its 'SFIV ID Card' presented at AOU as the core of its community experience. Player achievements and stats are stored, together with unspecified character info and, where teams of players are concerned, guild records. Content downloads are also planned for mobile phones, with additional services to be announced. Capcom's use of Taito's NESYS networking kit, meanwhile, means that networks are optimised locally, matching any free players in a single arcade. Dubbed Link Match System, this process doesn't yet extend beyond LAN play, though Battle Points earned during fights will count towards national online rankings. As for the game's console ambitions, the wait for an official announcement goes on.

FORMAT: 360, PC
PUBLISHER: VALVE
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
(TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS)
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: TBA

Left 4 Dead

Finally, a chance to get under the skin of Valve's zombie shooter



Keeping the boss-infected at arm's length might be enough: the boomer can vomit a considerable distance, while the hunter can leap from 30 feet away to pin down his victim



The zombie master

Chet Faliszek, a roving producer on *Left 4 Dead*, described gamers' reactions when they first played the game: "When we describe it people say, 'Yeah, we get the zombie game idea', and then they actually play it and they say, 'Oh, now we understand'. It's a game where you know where your teammates are and you know what they're doing, and you always have to be aware of them. More than any other game it has that thing where you have to work with the other players. When gamers get that they click and have the 'oh wow' moment. That's what it's about: four guys trying to survive together. It's not about the zombie thing, or the horror, it's about four characters."

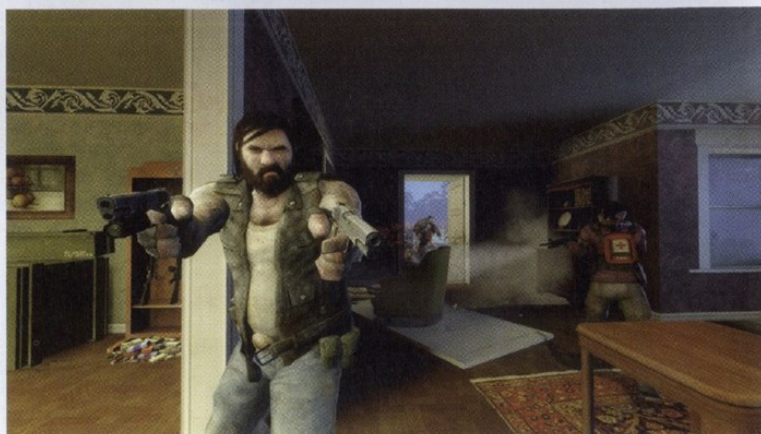
Zombies might be a familiar theme in gaming, but an asymmetric multiplayer FPS certainly isn't.

The reality of *Left 4 Dead* colliding with people's expectations was clear enough at the Munich playtest we attended earlier this month, as Germany's finest videogame journos shrieked in fear and delight. The survivor and infected teams were clashing on a previously unseen and remarkably intense new scenario: the Farmhouse. Rabid zombies came screaming out of the cornfields, and over-excited scribes punched the air as they managed to score an infected kill against the well-armed survivors.

The core of the game is easily understood: playing as part of a team of four armed survivors of the zombie apocalypse, you fight against AI-controlled waves of basic zombies and rather more potent boss types. You have to stick close to your buddies and covering fire between the FPS quartet is the only way to stay alive. What's most exciting about this latest showing, however, is that the game now has the boss-infected, or the player-zombies, fully implemented. While gamers can choose simply to play an AI-



The Source engine that was used to such great effect in *Half-Life 2* should keep the system specs down, but it's scaleable enough that the developer's level designers have been able to create some suitably daunting twilight environments



populated scenario, they can also elect to have players come in as the zombie boss characters – a rending, leaping hunter, the exploding, vomiting boomer, and the nightmarish behemoth of the tank. As these beasts, players can see unique routes through the level, available only to the infected, and have a constant outline of the survivors' positions in their vision. Playing as them, you begin to feel quite predatory.

It's unlike almost any other FPS experience (the closest relations are probably the *Aliens Vs Predator* games), and the infected find themselves constantly working on new ways to mess up the plans of the escaping survivors, dogging them constantly, right through the epic final showdown. On the Farmhouse level this was a military truck arriving to take the players from the scene, and that means staying put in the farmyard for five minutes as wave after cresting wave of rabid zombies pours in from the cornfields. It's a spectacularly gory



Few games focus on what gamers need from their co-op experience, but *Left 4 Dead* makes this its focus: you can always see where your buddies are, even through walls

crescendo, especially when the survivors find the mounted Gatling gun.

Valve is calling its five lengthy maps 'scenarios', rather than 'levels' or anything else, because they are huge, sprawling pieces of environmental design that could take players up to an hour to fight their way through. The Farmhouse is a great example of how proficient the level designers are at using the tools available to them. Despite being based on the ageing *Half-Life 2* tech, the woods and traintracks leading to the farm are brilliantly atmospheric and deliver exactly the right kind of visual intricacy and precarious situations to allow a game to play out in an interesting and evocative way every time.

Combine all this design savvy with a ravenous PC multiplayer modding community and an equally peckish 360 audience and you've got a recipe for one of the biggest multiplayer games of 2008. Valve's team, it would seem, are the ones with more than their fair share of the brains.



Battlefield: Heroes

Reinventing the multimillion-selling shooter as a casual web-game

GDC saw the announcement of the PC Gaming Alliance, a non-profit industry organisation dedicated to providing developers with the information and tools to secure the PC's future. It may not need saving: one slide presented by Intel's Randy Stude claimed that, in the US, 91 per cent of games played by under 18s were via free-to-play online games like *RuneQuest*. *Heroes* is DICE's experiment in that area: a free-to-play shooter that will run on practically any modern PC (even laptops), that's supported with in-game item sales and small amounts of web advertising.

This is not 1942: it's a comedy take on WWII that sees armed conflict erupt over cheating during an Olympic cycling event. Players sign up via the *Battlefield Heroes* website, and can be playing, without entering any credit card details, in just a few moments. They'll be asked to pick a side, (either the British-ish Royal Army or the German-ish National Army), a class (the commando, soldier and gunner equate to light, medium and heavy infantry) and play a single unique character.



The art style is obviously influenced by *Team Fortress 2* – all cartoon violence and exaggerated lines. That masks what producer **Ben Cousins** calls "the deepest *Battlefield* game ever". It's a team-deathmatch riot, with the flags of old battlefields providing more lives, rather than acting as spawn points. Each player will receive additional abilities; a gunner was shown firing incendiary bullets, alongside an area-of-effect heal and a 'legitimised wallhack'.

But is the concept enough to take the series in a new direction?



FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DICE
ORIGIN: SWEDEN
RELEASE: 2008



Battlefield: Heroes' cartoon styling might look as if it's been ripped straight from *Team Fortress 2*, but the low-polygon models mean it will run on even the most basic PCs



Battlefield: Bad Company

The console reinvention of a PC classic marches off in search of a reason to exist

Bad *Company* has problems. It's the most conventional game in this year's triple-header of shooters from DICE, a crisp and clean take on the FPS, blessed with outstanding technology and an excellent destructible world.

The problem: it's outclassed in every area by shooters released in 2007. *Crysis* offered more realistic destruction; *Stalker* a more atmospheric open world to explore. *Call Of Duty 4's* violence had more dramatic impact, while *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* made better



Bad Company offers similar combat sandbox thrills to *Crysis*. Once sent off with an objective, it's down to you to approach it from whichever angle seems appropriate

use of firstperson narrative techniques. *Bad Company* is a game in which you're given an arrow to follow, vehicles to get there, and explosions to make. But in singleplayer it has a sense of hollow futility; it's just a series of buildings and forests filled with men to knock down.

Multiplayer is far more interesting. It uses the singleplayer game's destructible scenery, and learns lessons from *Team Fortress 2* – mainly how much more interesting attack-versus-defence games can become – to craft something viciously tactical. The attackers must destroy or capture a crate of gold; the defending team hold it for as long as they can. Every enemy squad member spotted shows up on your team's radar, demanding a tactical approach, as defending teams can lock down an area around one crate, but are easily flanked when trying to hold all three.

What *Bad Company* proves is that technological excellence is no longer enough: the multiplayer shows that a great game can be made of the Frostbite engine. We hope it's a singleplayer prospect, too.



Much has been made about *Bad Company's* destruction modelling, with great reason. Blowing your way through a wall, rather than having to navigate around it, offers cheap, messy thrills

FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DICE
ORIGIN: SWEDEN
RELEASE: 2008
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177



FORMAT: WII
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: PLANET MOON STUDIOS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2008

Battle Of The Bands

If you want to be a Guitar Hero or in a Rock Band, but can't even be bothered to learn a fake instrument, this might be for you



Five different styles of music are represented, and 30 tracks total recorded in each of those five styles – although it has to be said that our extensive preview twiddling showed the country versions to be the most preferable

As *Guitar Hero* lazily smashes through sales barriers, publishers are looking at the rhythm-action genre and seeing something: cash. *Battle Of The Bands* (formerly *Band Mashups*) deserves notice among the current crop of rhythm-action games, even though it employs a similar interface to that developed by Harmonix: small circles move up a bar and towards a line, and moving the Wii Remote in the manner indicated produces the desired result. It does itself a disservice by inviting the comparison, because the game is fundamentally dissimilar in what it demands from the player.

First, you are not playing music but directing a band's performance in a particular style against another band: if you're winning with your country boys, then *Blitzkrieg Bop* plays with a bluegrass twang, and when overtaken by the rockers it takes on a much more familiar sound. The tug-of-war between players results in a version that mashes the two alternatives together and gives dynamic feedback on the ongoing battle. As well as this, various bonuses



You swing the Remote left, right, stab forward and wave it around to varying degrees to hit the circles – and the harder levels pose a significant co-ordination challenge

'attack' the other player's score (which can be guarded against), and there are direct confrontation sections which allow direct attacks on the other band.

And that's your lot. It's simple and in keeping with the type of game Nintendo's console is becoming associated with – but crucially, it's also a quality step above the mini-party-multi-throwaway games seen on the machine thus far. And thanks to its tracklisting and easy controls, a game you'll probably be coming across at parties before too long. And having videogames at parties can't be a bad thing, can it?

Deadly Creatures

It's *Microcosmos* by way of *River City Ransom* as Rainbow Studios reveals its fresh take on a bug's life

If you think you know how a game about insects would play out on Wii, *Deadly Creatures* may come as something of a shock. There are no cartoon eyes, wisecracking beetles or post-Fordism in-jokes about honey production here. Instead, we have gooey mandibles, abdomen-rupturing combat and a skittering, unnerving atmosphere that perfectly captures the impromptu violence of nature close-up.

Hailing from Arizona, where every trip out to the supermarket can provide opportunity for a critter-propelled visit to the local casualty department, developer Rainbow Studios made its name on racing games such as the *ATV* and *MX* series. A playthrough of the preview level of *Deadly Creatures* suggests that the small team is handling the abrupt shift in genre to thirdperson 'action thriller' with considerable poise. With an ambitiously Swiftian story unfolding on insect and human scales, the game allows players to take on the roles of both a scorpion and a tarantula on alternating levels. Taking a nod from THQ's own *Sphinx And The Cursed Mummy*, each

character's approach is different: the scorpion a natural brawler, battling bugs and lizards through linear environments, while the tarantula is a stealthy 'ninja', creeping his way through more open-world levels.

So far only the scorpion has been revealed, but from what we've played the game is looking solid, with a tightly monitored drip-feed of new moves and abilities to keep the action interesting. Crucially, the often-patchy Wii controls have a real sense of connection in combat, allowing for pincer grabs via trigger presses along with gesture-controlled tail swings.

Questions remain over how things will play out in the ambitious and potentially more problematic tarantula levels, but it's hard not to root for a project that shows this kind of independence. It's a significant risk to focus a game on the least lovable aspects of nature and, so far, *Deadly Creatures* is quietly remarkable: Nintendo's console may be, y'know, for kids, but that hasn't stopped Rainbow Studios from making a game about, y'know, getting your head ripped off by a gecko.



FORMAT: WII
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: RAINBOW STUDIOS
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: 2008

The seen-but-not-played tarantula levels promise a more multi-dimensional freeform experience than the scorpion's areas. The good news is that, so far, the camera system seems relatively adept at dealing with the occasional scuttling floor-to-wall transition



One area of *Dark Sector* is unambiguous – the visuals throughout are of a very high standard indeed, and many of the beasts are beautifully detailed in their decrepitude

Dark Sector

"How much more black could this be? None. None more black"

If nothing else, *Dark Sector* at least polarises opinion. Some think it a perfectly decent run-and-gunner with some nice visuals and an interesting central mechanic; some think it a knock-off of better games that hasn't got the basics right and doesn't have enough innovation to justify much attention. As always, the truth is in the middle somewhere: *Dark Sector* may be derivative and have a few kinks, but it's also assured and decent enough to sometimes be a diverting experience. And when you get it right, there is definitely something to be said for the glaive.

This is not a poetical type of sword, but a fictional Krull-like weapon that grows out of the protagonist's arm and essentially acts as a whirling razor, with the handy ability to return to the owner after being thrown. It's the result of an infectious disease that the game's main character, Mr Genero Secret Agent, contracts at the end of the prologue – a well-staged preamble to the main game played out in monochrome and in wholly

human form. The disease mutates as the game progresses, upgrading the abilities of the glaive and arm until they're acting as shield generator, lethal weapon and collecting tool.

The game's minor problems with the odd bit of sticky scenery, and some non-cover that looks like it should be, will likely be tweaked before the game's release. But the enemy AI is a little more of a worry, based firmly in the old days and dependent on simple pathfinding and/or basic duck and cover patterns. There's little fun to be had pitting your wits against the common troops, who will take up positions, fire at you and rarely move – so if you're almost dead you can merely duck your head and rely on them not to put you under any further pressure. They also don't notice bullets hitting them. It rather deadens the excitement of seeing a group of them spill out on to the often well-designed battlefields, although to be fair there are different varieties of troop that, when mixed, can mitigate the faults of each



The game is full of different melee kills that use your spiky hand in a creatively dismembering manner – and make the enemies scream very loudly. Smell the glaive

other. In particular, there's an unpleasant fellow with a shield and machete who'll simply hunt you down while you're trying to hide, and who will be responsible for more than a few surprising deaths.

In contrast to this, the bosses on show display imagination and, even if they don't require any techniques you haven't used before, have a pyrotechnic quality in their presentation. A big, charging beast, similar to *Gears Of War's* Berserker, is made all the more palatable, and believable, by its boneheaded willingness to dash through barricades and buildings to get to you, crashing down structures and tossing debris in a show of graphical excess. The visual content in general is gruesome, with gore aplenty and little touches such as the in-engine cutscenes that do the job of showing off a fine level of detail.

Dark Sector's final form is difficult to predict. There's no doubt that some of the minor rough edges will be smoothed away, but that major issue with regard to the enemy AI is unlikely to be changed. Because of that, it seems certain to remain a divisive issue, with gamers prepared to overlook faults in favour of a relatively untroubling shooter experience against those who yearn for sophistication in every element of a game. Good luck to the former, but we're in the latter camp.

FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: D3 PUBLISHER
DEVELOPER: DIGITAL EXTREMES
ORIGIN: CANADA
RELEASE: APRIL 4
PREVIOUSLY IN: E174, E182, E184



What are you buying?

By collecting briefcases scattered around the game's environments, the basic weapons can be upgraded in all of the usual ways: reload speed, accuracy, clip size and so on. This feature is accessed by finding one of the game's hidden pleasures: the underground weapon salesman. Taking a cue from *Resident Evil 4's* merchant, his thick Russian accent greets the 'yankee-doodle' with a few choice insults. "If you're lucky, I'll throw you some peanuts" indeed.



At the end of the first level you meet a fully infected monster with awesome power – individual elements of which you begin to acquire as the game progresses



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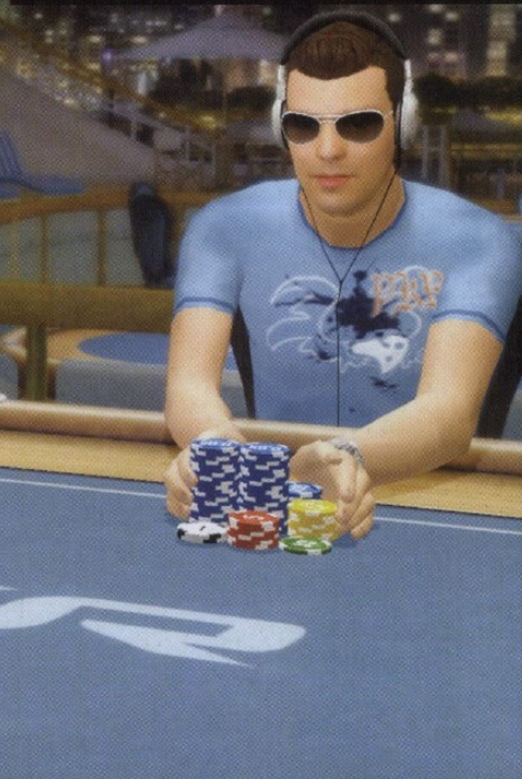


All images taken from actual in-game screenshots.



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giant step forward"

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online poker is here..."
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VORSPRUNG DURCH TECHNIK

IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW FAST YOU DRIVE, SAYS CODEMASTERS, BUT ABOUT WHY YOU DRIVE FAST. WITH A NEW ENGINE AND DIRECTION, IS RACE DRIVER: GRID THE MOST EXCITING RACER OF ITS GENERATION?

The presentation's barely begun when Codemasters drops the bombshell: your favourite racing games, the *Gothams*, *Forzas* and *Gran Turismos*, aren't actually about racing at all. What are they about? It's never fully explained, though the allusion is to something tangential – ownership, or glamour, or simple iterative realism. Anything but what they're meant to be.

"*Gotham 4* was a cool," admits **Ralph Fulton**, chief designer of *Race Driver: Grid*. "But when we started looking at what this game's 'thing' was, we looked at our competitors and found that, as a whole, they were concentrating on everything *but* the racing experience. We concluded that our strengths, historically, are in providing that experience. We do excellent AI, excellent physics, world-leading damage systems. We look at the

competition and they're palpably not doing what we do really well."

If it sounds like a rather flat description of a game about the innate buzz of racing, it's understandable; *Grid*'s 'thing' is hard to put into words. It's a truly generational sequel, as unlikely a *TOCA* game as *Dirt* was a *Colin McRae Rally*. What it hopes to capture is something ethereal: an air that exists wherever there's a race, an electricity that runs through the mere notion of taking the wheel. Imagine a storied, charismatic driver – Kowalski, say, from the movie *Vanishing Point* – looking back over a life spent chasing that high, wherever it's to be found. *Grid* has that same deep, universal, uncomplicated love.

Its issue with modern racing seems, primarily, to be its obsession with science and technology. Too many facts and

figures. Too many publicised polygon counts. Too much telemetry written across the screen. In its three territories, Europe, America and Japan, *Grid* seldom stares at the intricacies of vehicle manufacture; it never feels like a Haynes manual. Despite inheriting *Ego* (formerly *Neon*), the most sophisticated engine a racer could have, its attention is drawn more to the bonnets themselves than what's beneath them.

"I'm not sure anyone could argue there's a chasm in the racing market," laughs Fulton. "Last year, we saw AAA racer after AAA racer come out, and obviously we were thinking then about how we'd differentiate ourselves. With many franchises, particularly racing, each iteration becomes an exercise in box-ticking: more cars, more tracks. We didn't want to go down that road."

TITLE: RACE DRIVER: GRID
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN: UK
RELEASE: TBA

Not to sound too obvious, but roads are a big thing here. Rather than a fetish for clinical, famous straights and bends, its reverence veers towards the iconic. And in its treatments of Haruna (the celebrated hill-climb from *Initial D*), Milan (a sun-struck, hazy dash through and around the Galleria) and San Francisco (a sepia-toned tribute to *Dirty Harry*) it gives renewed meaning to that overused term. The open-wheel touring cars of European circuits, belching muscle cars of US cities and tuned drift cars of illegal Japanese street-racing all convey an uncommon sense of heritage.

Unlike the era of *Colin McRae 04* and *Race Driver 2*, where the two companion brands ploughed damagingly through each other's turf, this game is healthily unique. "There's healthy competition,

"WE HAVE HAD A LOT OF JAPANESE VISITORS TO THE STUDIO WHO SEEM TO HAVE BEEN VERY IMPRESSED BOTH BY THE REALISM OF, SAY, HARUNA OR SHIBUYA, AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES"

maybe, but no overlap in terms of content," insists Fulton. "We've gone out of our way to make a clear distinction between the two brands; although they're noticeably from the same studio, they're palpably different. There's an overlap of personnel in the art team and programming, and obviously our outsource studio in Kuala Lumpur is heavily involved. But the key personnel differ from project to project." And he should know: a lead designer here, he wasn't even involved in *Dirt*.

Fulton laughs of *Dirt*'s career mode.

"That you were climbing, literally, a pyramid. It's a fair criticism. I think we've tried to ground our career mode much more in the notion of a world which evolves. And while a lot of racing games have the pretence of choice, where really you're just moving in a linear direction, we want the player to choose his career path and what to do next."

Starting you off as a driver-for-hire, *Grid* is a game about the lifestyle of a driver as much as the abstract concept.



Grid's entire HUD is now 3D, its text catching the light and casting shadows. The game gives you bonuses for driving entirely in-car, though the real-world manufacturers have drawn the line at showing damage beyond the roll-cage

What the games share most of all now is experience. And, of course, shockingly powerful technology. Burned somewhat by the weak multiplayer and meandering singleplayer of *Dirt*, *Grid* hopes to make no such mistakes. "It was at pains with its literalness, wasn't it?"

COMPANY MATTERS

As if to atone for *Dirt*'s lonely time trials, *Grid* wastes little time in giving you a team, a teammate and those all-important sponsorship deals. The reputation of both driver and team is described as an "essential concept", leading in practical terms to the acquisition of better garages, co-drivers and sponsors. It's hoped tacticians will revel in the prospect of auditioning over 300 unique AI drivers, many of whom will emerge, race, thrive and falter during the average career. Cars, meanwhile, feature eight spaces for sponsor logos, lending a neat touch of cosmetic choice while doubtless paying a few of Codemasters' bills. Sponsorship comes with conditions, however, such as crash penalties or victory bonuses, craftily applied to both of your team's drivers.

You earn money because it's there to be earned, because it represents victory, progress and ultimately dominance. Limited to the '45 best racing cars ever made', its line-up is in no way a collect-a-thon, and its career is barely even a ladder. Each territory is a revolving galaxy of different drivers, teams and events, able to create its own history and heroes. If you choose, for example, you can become a master of the Japanese streets and hills with nary a thought for the west, or vice versa. The world can wait. It can live without you.

"We do have a Japanese SKU planned but, to be perfectly honest, the Japanese content isn't for the gratification of a Japanese audience," says Fulton. "It's for those in Europe and America to whom that content really appeals. The whole Japanese tuner, export, drift culture has global appeal – that's why we put that in. Though we have had a lot of Japanese visitors to the studio, like consultants who've worked with us on the drift aspects of the game, who seem to have been very impressed both by the realism of, say, Haruna or Shibuya, and the authenticity of the different disciplines."

Is this a style-based game? "I'm not sure it is, actually. I'm not sure how much



Grid wouldn't work if bound by the rules of traditional racing, which is why terminal crashes trigger its 'flashback' mode, where you can rewind a short replay and try again. This won't function in multiplayer, however





Codemasters likes to boast that its crashes feature no pre-canned animations. Its physics and damage models are conclusively realistic, buckling, scratching and breaking cars at the precise point of impact, with high-speed crashes causing barrel rolls and terminal damage



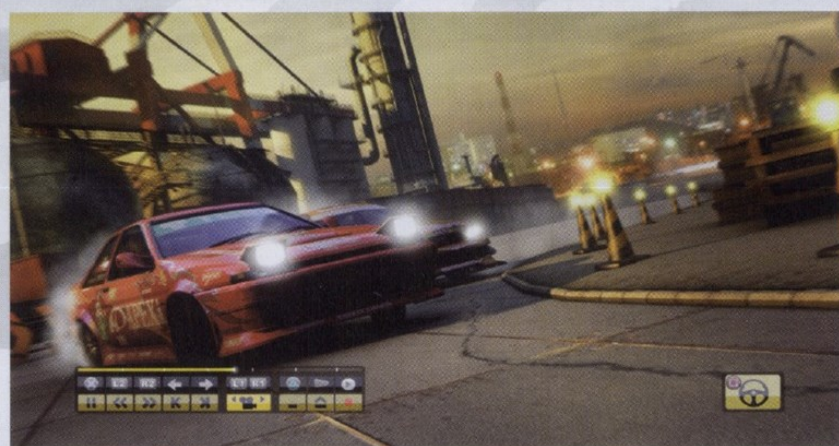
Gotham is either, for that matter. I know the thinking behind the Kudos system and how it fits their brand, but we're not really about that – we're about aggression, conflict and beating the other person whatever the cost. So I guess our own internal rewards system is in opposition to the Kudos system which, supposedly, rewards flair – although it rewards finishing first disproportionately highly. For us, this is all about being the best driver and, of course, earning the most money. It's a crass mechanic, maybe, but a cool one – it's what makes the world of motorsport go round."

Whether it's the Le Mans 24 Hour (which in its *Grid* incarnation is 24 minutes of simulated day and night) or a drift battle through the Yokohama Docks, all of *Grid*'s events share this competitive, even combative spirit. This is 'exciting, close, aggressive, destructive' racing. Its damage system, now able to scratch a car as easily as bend it around a lamppost, is described as 'punishing'. Its AI drivers have unique personalities – different blends of nerve, anger and cunning.

But how, given that *Dirt* promised much of the same but seldom showed it off, do you coax that out? "When you're developing any system like that, you need it to work in any situation," Fulton

HIGHWAY BATTLE

"Well, there are two points there, aren't there?" notes Fulton of the frustrations of bringing *Grid* to both Xbox Live and PlayStation Network. "First, all your friends are on Xbox Live. That's a generational thing which will be difficult to resolve. [PSN] is nowhere near as robust. Live has to be the biggest achievement of Microsoft's entry into consoles, it's a brilliantly all-encompassing system – and it's a dream to develop for. We have two strands to this: for PS3 and PC, we're integrating Xbox Achievements into an awards system so it doesn't feed into any online tag or persona. It's a really unsatisfactory solution, to be honest, but that's the extent of it: we develop really cool Achievements for Xbox Live which then have no utility anywhere else. It's a shame."



There are 15 locations, each of which is unique both in looks and demands. We caught only scant glimpses of the game with post-processing in full force, but each was revelatory. There's hardly a pixel onscreen that isn't polished with multiple shaders and effects

explains. "So when you expose it to the randomness of the race it has to stand up. But AI is absolutely vital to this game, to fulfilling its promise of a compelling race experience. They can't just look like button-racers, they have to look like they're being driven by individuals affected by factors that

haven't done our jobs. And that's all in the tuning – we've got all our systems working now; we just need to tune that balance of excitement and realism."

That much we can confirm: *Grid* is exciting, and it is realistic. It is, in fact, the most exciting straight racer of this generation, and looks more realistic,

"WE'RE NOT DOING A PIXEL-PERFECT SIMULATION HERE, BUT IF IT STARTS TO LOOK COMICAL OR CARTOONY THEN WE HAVEN'T DONE OUR JOBS. WE JUST NEED TO TUNE THAT BALANCE OF EXCITEMENT AND REALISM"

you can recognise. So that's why, as a game module, we started working with that earlier than anything else. It happened more or less in parallel with the track design.

"Obviously, we're still dealing with a real-world motorsport so it can't look foolish. There are certain elements within each race that we'll make hyper-real, and that approach extends to the visuals as well. We're not doing a pixel-perfect simulation here. We exaggerate certain types of things, but if it starts to look comical or cartoony then we

in every sense bar its weather, than *PGR4*. And these qualities are connected. The 40,000 3D spectators in Milan and Shibuya aren't just there to outnumber those of other games. They, like the lanterns and balloons that swing in the wake of passing cars, are part of that 'air' which has, noticeably, been sapped by racing's dash for photorealism. Last issue, we asked what was next for a genre seemingly at its peak. The answer, when it comes to the raw electricity of it all, might just be everything.



Airs & Graces

Frontier's new WiiWare game suggests that
the answer to making it big is to think small



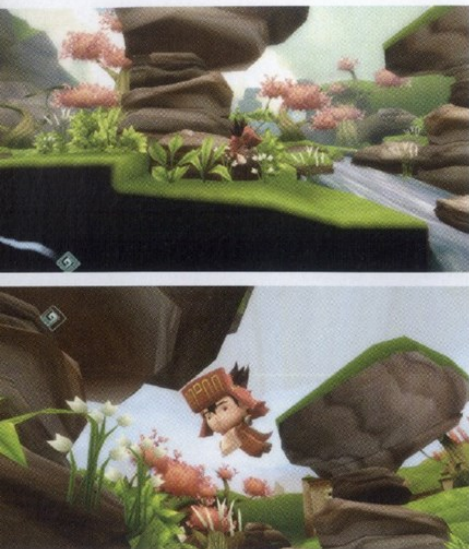
It's hard to think of a developer quite like it. Independent, 160 employees large and led by one of gaming's earliest star developers, with a production roster that encompasses the tech-led blockbuster conspiracy thriller opus *The Outsider*, plus the *Thrillville* and Wallace & Gromit games which have carved out a profitable niche for the company in family-friendly entertainment, and the traditional PC management strategist-friendly *Rollercoaster Tycoon*. And then there's *Elite 4*. Frontier Developments' games run the gamut from promises of expanding the boundaries of videogame design, technology and storytelling to safe, established franchises and fun, uncomplicated diversions.

The studio is still amiably led by **David Braben**, who retains the faintly dorky air of a '60s-born Cambridge graduate computer scientist. Because he is one. He's affable with his employees, and they're comfortable talking over and poking fun

at him. But, in a media climate in which developers closely guard their opinions for fear of recrimination, he's also emphatically, and (largely) reasonably, outspoken. He's forthright about many subjects, but on this bright, February day in Frontier's large offices in a science park on the outskirts of Cambridge, he's concerned about the enduring problem of keeping staff stimulated and nurturing (and taking advantage of) their creativity in the face of the pressures of finishing huge, multi-million, multi-year game projects. It's a situation that neither serves studios, whose capital depends on ideas, nor staff, whose well-being depends on variety and the sense of being valued.

"I've heard some astonishing things in job interviews where someone says they've been working on footballers' noses for the last two years, and they're going bananas," Braben says. "They say that they're feeling a bit jaded, that their ideas never come to anything. The first thing we can do is to

TITLE: **LOSTWINDS**
FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MAY (US), TBA 2008 (EUR)**



Art designer Chris Symonds has a background in sculpture, and, correspondingly, surfaces and shapes have a composed solidity to them that, like *Mario Galaxy*'s, Wii is good at resolving

rekindle that." How? Frontier's answer is a little game called *LostWinds*.

Developed by a small team that's only been working intensively together for the last three months, *LostWinds* is puzzle platformer destined to be one of the first titles for Nintendo's WiiWare downloadable gaming platform. It's the result of a concept, based around wind, that a Frontier designer named **Steven Burgess** submitted to the company's 'Game of the Week' forum. While the Nunchuk runs the player character, Toku, around 2D levels, the Remote is used to generate gusts that can boost him up to high ledges, or sweep up enemies into vortices.

The Game of the Week forum is a place for staff members to propose ideas and for everyone else to pull them apart, and has been an institution that has grown with Frontier since its inception in 1993. Though many other studios employ similar methods of stimulating a creative environment, the difference is that Frontier has actually made a game as a direct result of it. "We all need a bit of variation, and the point I hope *LostWinds* shows is that game development doesn't have to be stifling," Braben continues, before handing the presentation over to Burgess, who remains the project's lead designer.

The first thing that's apparent about *LostWinds* is that, even in this early build, much of the world reacts to the Wii Remote's cursor. Patches of grass swish as it passes over them, enemies hunker down. Toku shields his face and shifts his weight forward when you draw a flurry of air over him. "We wanted to make everything very tactile," says Burgess. The world, drawn in 3D, is highly interconnected, with various level heights and openings into caverns that invite exploration and experimentation: "The levels are like toyboxes or playgrounds," says Burgess. "In every scene there are things to find and do."

Toku can only run left and right, scramble up



the lowest steps and hop over narrow gaps, so the Wii Remote's pointer cursor, explained in-game as the Wind Spirit, Enril, is crucial to helping him reach the areas he needs to, as are various tools and objects. For example, the game contains a range of bulbs that must be uprooted and planted in soft ground to various effects. Some will suck Toku into them and spit him high into the air with an upwards slash of the cursor; others will provide seeds that allow him to float gently down to earth, create barriers to enemies,



"THE GAME'S LEVELS ARE LIKE TOYBOXES OR PLAYGROUNDS. IN EVERY SCENE THERE ARE THINGS TO FIND AND DO"

From left: James Chilcott (programmer), John Laws (Frontier's head of art), Andy Scott (senior programmer), Jonny Watts (producer), Chris Symonds (lead artist) and Steven Burgess (lead designer)

form bridges and lure bad guys into traps. Because Toku is so small, however, he can't pick up bulbs on his own, so he needs a quick lifting gust of wind. The puzzle element lies in correctly arranging – and rearranging, since bulbs can be replanted in other locations – elements like bulbs in the levels to allow Toku's passage.

Over the game's course, Toku will recover

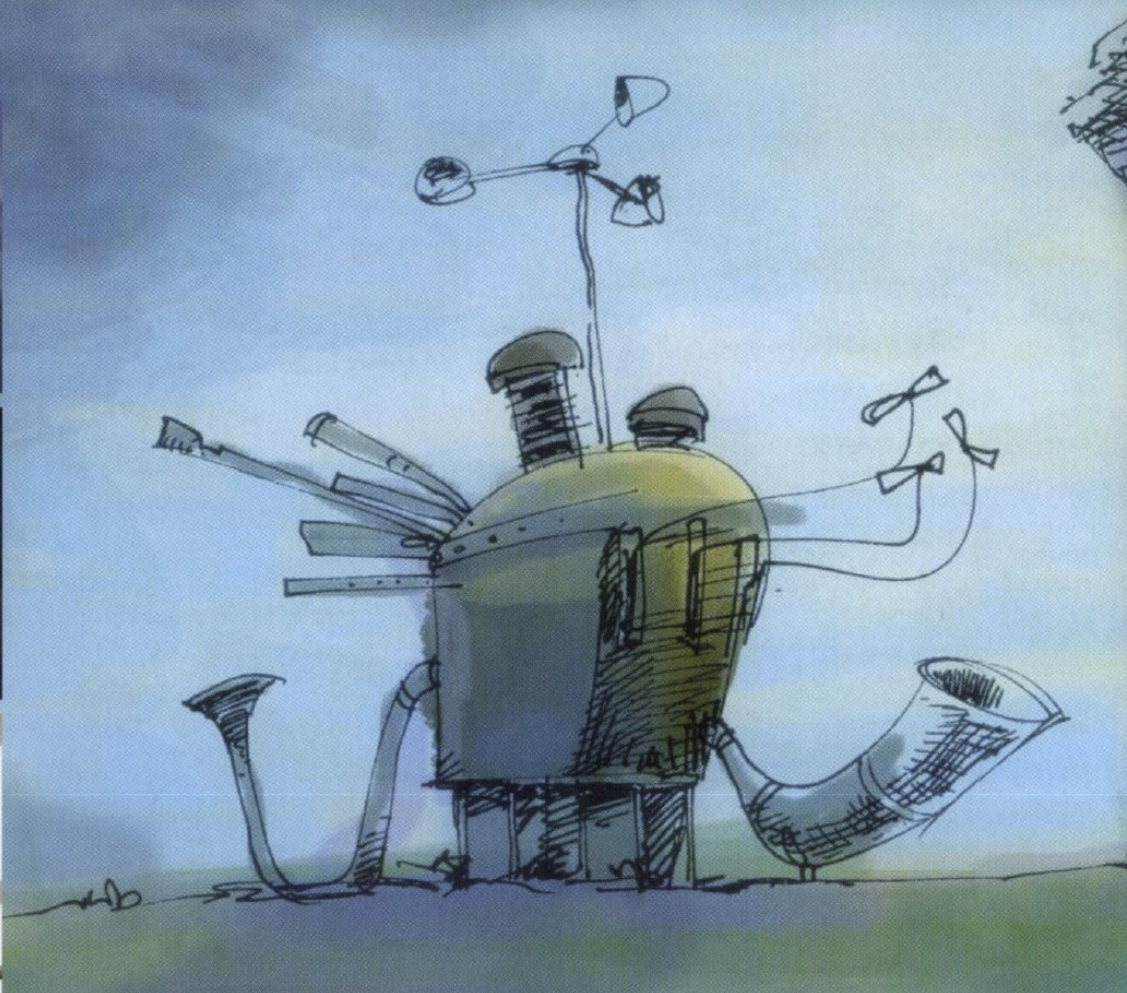


Toku will meet various charmingly designed NPCs at shrines during his adventure, but their specific roles are currently under wraps

Enril's former skills and other abilities, such as a cape that allows the cursor to draw a path for him to travel along through the air (which is functionally, if not yet graphically, implemented in the build we play), slipstreams, and longer-lasting wind power. Wind power regenerates more quickly when Toku is standing on the ground and is graphically represented with a spiral gauge on the cursor. New capabilities will give access to new areas, or easier access in already visited ones.

Though the team, currently 16-strong, is keen to claim that *LostWinds*' graphic style is original, being neither particularly western nor eastern-themed, it exhibits distinct similarities to *Zelda: The Wind Waker*, from Toku's Link-like design and characterisation – and his automatic jump over gaps – to the colourful solidity of the rocks, hills and chunkily archaic ruins that comprise the world. Indeed, Burgess is sporting a Nintendo wristband during the demo. But *LostWinds* has its own individual visual charm, as exhibited by its treatment of the game's monsters, called glorbs, which are meant to be physical incarnations of the game's antagonist, an evil spirit called Balasar. In their natural state they're black, globular clouds, but they can possess various environmental objects, such as piles of rocks or leaves. When they do, they take on new characteristics – leaves become charismatically awkward, flapping bird-like

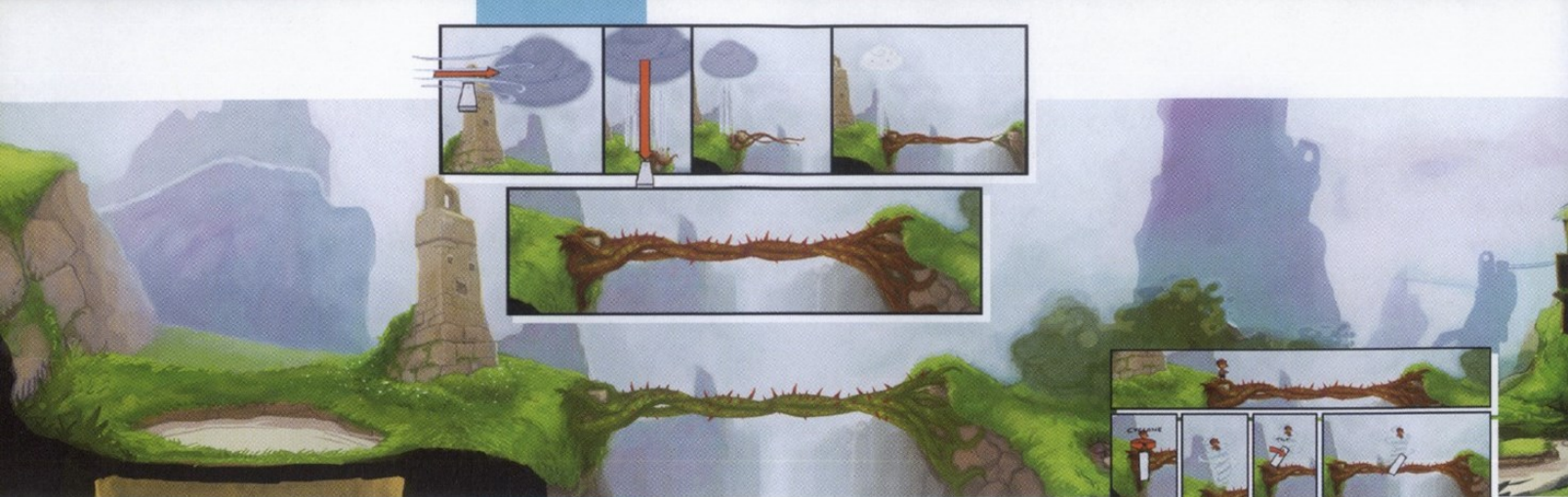




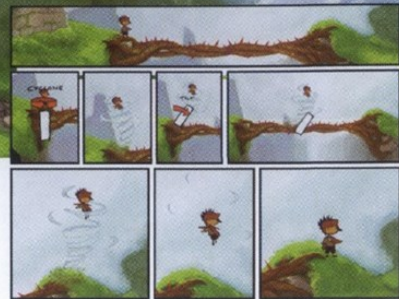
Matters of opinion

Braben (above) hasn't been a stranger to controversy lately, having become something of a headline-friendly firebrand mouthpiece for Frontier. Though it has created lots of welcome attention for Frontier's games, the tendency for videogame media to reduce issues down to sensationalist headlines often does him few favours, such as the time he was presented as claiming that *BioShock* and *Halo 3* weren't 'next-gen'. "When the headline came, it looked like I was slagging those games off, but when you read the body you realise I'm saying these are fantastic games. Even though I was being careful, it still got taken out of context. You get to a situation where you daren't speak your mind because you get called out in a headline." As a man who believes debate is a vital part of the creative process, that's not a healthy state of affairs to be in.





Frontier is implementing various Wii Remote capabilities into its various tools and toys, as these concept drawings show



beasts. "They're not meant to be birds, they're pretending to be birds; they're actually masses of dark matter and decay grabbing hold of some plants and flying," clarifies Frontier's head of art, **John Laws**. Rocks, meanwhile, become ponderous mounds that resemble hermit crabs. It will be possible to defeat glorbs in their natural state by carefully catching them up in a vortex by drawing a circle around them, and propelling them with a gust to splat against a wall.

Just as *LostWinds'* visual style bounces off an existing game but adds its own character, so too does its gameplay. There's *Okami* in drawing flows of water from pools to bulbs to make them grow. There's *Super Mario Bros 2* in pulling plants out of the ground and throwing them at glorbs or obstacles to destroy them. There's *Kirby: Power Paintbrush* in controlling Toku by drawing paths for him through space and blowing him around with gusts. New powers give access to new areas as they do in *Metroid*. But *LostWinds* manages to remain individual by tightly weaving each influence into what already seems to be a coherently designed whole.

**"THIS ISN'T A CHEAP GAME
– WE'RE PUTTING OUR HEART
AND SOUL INTO IT. WE WANT
THIS TO BE EXCEPTIONAL"**



physical world, and the Remote is used to provide indirect assistance. But using both together is necessary for progression.

For all that *LostWinds* is already visually polished, however, the controls still feel a little rough around the edges and are initially tricky to pick up. Mastering Toku's movement with

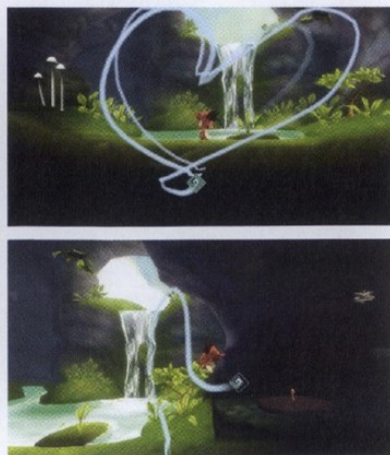
one hand and aiding him with the other demands a jump in cognition, even with the memory of collecting and firing off star bits in *Super Mario Galaxy* still fresh in our minds, and the gestural nature of many of the wind cursor's capabilities takes time to learn how to perform. Burgess, of course, can smoothly skip Toku across chasms and up cliffs, effortlessly snaring glorbs and blowing them across the screen as he goes, so, presumably, practice will make perfect.

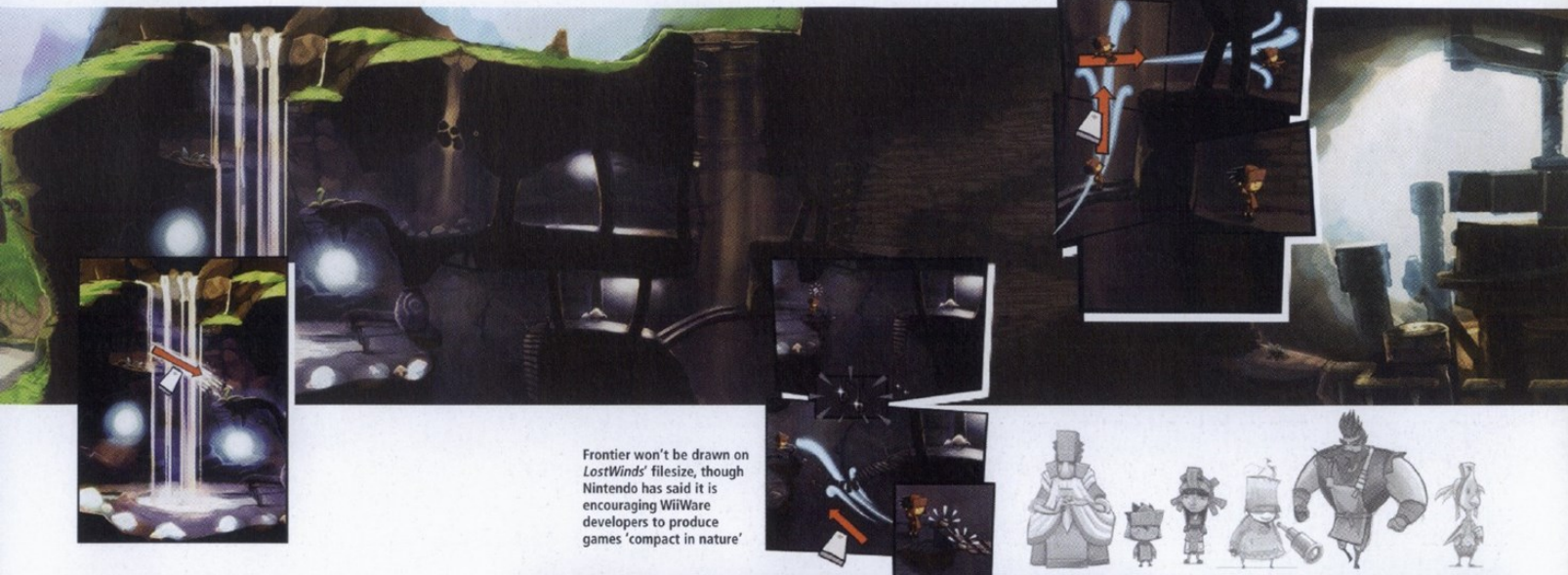
The polish and care that this build demonstrates elsewhere, however, can easily carry *LostWinds* as a standalone, boxed game. As Frontier MD **Dave Walsh** says, "This isn't a cheap game – we're putting our heart and soul into it. You can't do things cheaply, and we want this to be exceptional." Instead, it's a game specifically made with Wii, and WiiWare, in mind. "When Nintendo approached us about WiiWare, its vision seemed to tally with what we wanted to achieve. We're bursting with ideas, and people that have Wiis just don't want another party game," Walsh continues. "This is the sort of game that I bought my Wii to play – it's playful and engages with some sort of emotion," adds Laws, explaining another of the wind cursor's features – the final game will include special objects, called wind stones, that will spin in breezes and make a chiming sound. The current aim is for them to add a playful musical component to the game, but this isn't even close to being shown when we visit.

***LostWinds'* nature** as a WiiWare game is central to its existence, however. "We're doing this ourselves – we've been able to go down this road without a middleman saying: 'Can you make this more realistic; can you put guns in?' This is the game we wanted to make," explains Watts. In other words, because it's downloadable, Frontier has managed to avoid having to sign it up to a publisher, a fact that has allowed the project to fit in naturally with the other, bigger ones for which Frontier has



The gust power is shown above: an upwards sweep of the Wii Remote while holding A lifts Toku, and a horizontal one sends him flying. Wind power only regenerates quickly while Toku is earthbound



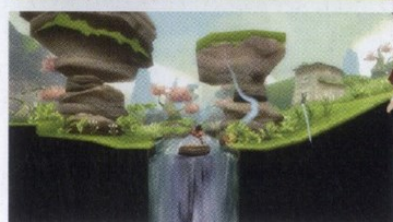
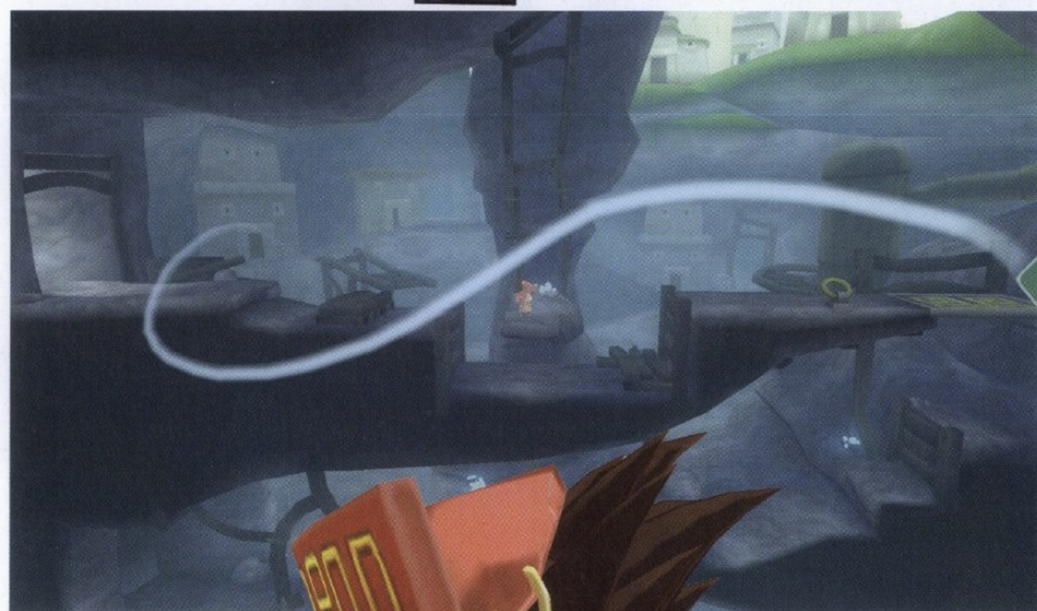


Frontier won't be drawn on *LostWinds'* filesize, though Nintendo has said it is encouraging WiiWare developers to produce games 'compact in nature'

milestones and deadlines to fulfil. After all, the concept has been hanging around at Frontier for several years – Burgess came up with the idea before Frontier moved to its current offices. The team won't be drawn on whether the strategy would work equally well if it were developing for PlayStation Network or Xbox Live Arcade, especially given the latter's reputation for requiring that developers adhere to demanding guidelines and testing procedures. But Braben is keen to emphasise that they "definitely want to do those things".

Something else that has made *LostWinds* viable for Frontier to produce is that it's based on technology that the company has developed for its other projects. As much as *The Outsider* is being created for Xbox 360 and PS3, various elements of it can scale down to the likes of *LostWinds*. "It makes it easier to take tech from other projects to add effects like bloom," says Watts. It's a wise use of the huge investment in research and development that Frontier, like most developers creating games for the current generation of consoles, has to expend. "Being an independent company, it allows us to jump around between different projects – look at the different games we're making and they're massively contrasting – theme parks, thrillers, outer space," continues Braben. "But when you look at the technology under each one it's actually very similar, in terms of tools and production processes. What it actually all comes down to is stimulating that creative flow and imagination that's behind these projects."

For an independent developer, Frontier's commitment to diversity over specialisation is a bold answer to the pressures of creating modern games. But for all the challenge it must be to juggle multiple projects of multiple types, supporting ideas is a wise strategy. And, as *LostWinds* demonstrates, download channels like WiiWare have allowed that strategy to become a whole lot more practicable. By thinking small Frontier is showing how it can do big things.

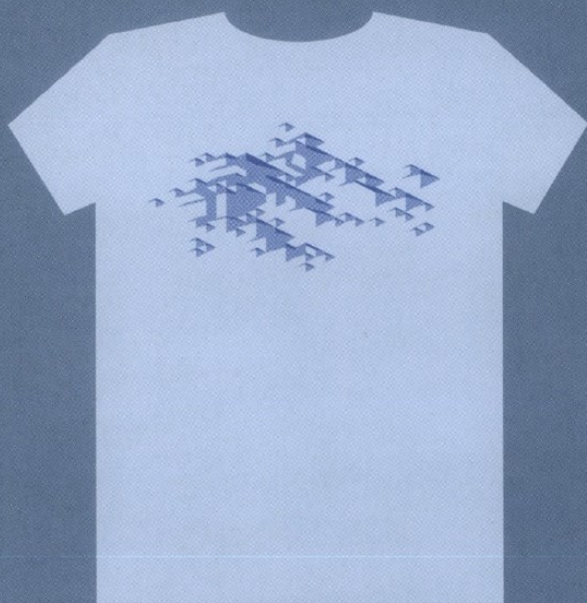


Concept drawings suggest a variety of settings beyond the grassy vales and rocky caverns currently being shown off

Day dreaming

Designer Burgess remembers that the basic idea for *LostWinds* came to him on a miserable day while Frontier was based in a large farmhouse in the Cambridgeshire countryside. "I was watching the trees and leaves from the window and remember thinking about how many ways the wind shapes and manipulates different things in the world, and wished there was some way to become the wind in a game," he explains. "I started waving my arms around, creating puzzles in my head while pretending to be in control of a then-imaginary world. Shortly after this, the idea of a second character came to me. The concept of having a second vulnerable character able to be moved by the wind yet at the same time protected by it somehow felt really beautiful."

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THE MAKING OF Grand Theft Auto

From 2D to part IV: How a bunch of British creatives invented a genre, transformed gamers' perceptions, and embarked on their most ambitious mission to date

Sitting down with Rockstar Games president **Sam Houser** in the freshly decorated demo room of the company's headquarters in downtown New York, we ask him how he's doing. Just over 1,100 uninterrupted words later, he's finished giving us an answer.

Houser is, in his own words, the "loudmouth" of the Rockstar organisation, not that you'd know it in recent years, since he's been maintaining a low public profile while the company over which he presides has become the default scapegoat for anything that is perceived to be wrong with videogaming. The most testing point came two years ago, in a Washington courtroom, when he and several of his colleagues faced up to a nine-hour cross-examination at the hands of US federal investigators brandishing stacks of printouts detailing thousands of internal Rockstar emails. Some going for a group of people in the business of making digital entertainment.

All that nonsense may be in the past, but it's certainly left its mark. "It's made our resolve that much stronger, and in some ways I feel that some of the negative stuff had to happen to keep everybody's feet on the ground, and to keep everybody hungry and motivated," Houser says seriously. "With the sales of some of our previous games we've accomplished a lot of what people would have thought we'd set out to achieve, and the fact that, after all this time, we can still be this hungry and ambitious and driven and crazy – that's got to be a good sign. Because if they can't shake us now, then what can they do to us?" His eyes are sparkling and he's laughing heartily now, and we can't help but join in.

It's important to note that Houser isn't the monster his critics would have him painted as. OK, apparently one Raymond Liotta once described him as "a fucking lunatic" (Houser took it as quite the compliment), but this bearded bouncing ball of energy is also a sensitive soul ("I get a panic attack if I get a parking ticket,"

he says, laughing again), and is desperately committed to supporting those around him, which in the context of *GTA* involves ensuring that we understand that it's the dev staff at Rockstar North in Edinburgh who are the real talents behind the phenomenon. There is an unusual sort of bond in evidence here – the result, perhaps, of standing together in times of difficulty – and not for nothing is the Rockstar Games setup sometimes referred to as a family. Whenever Houser's colleagues talk about him it is with respect, but also admiration for what the company has achieved under his leadership in the ten short years since its birth.

Anyway, we're here in New York City not to talk about videogame controversy – an issue that hasn't so much been flogged to death as beaten with an iron pipe, slashed into variously sized pieces and lobbed into a dumpster. We're here to discover the real stories behind a series that has transformed perceptions of what the 3D action game can be, and has, with each further iteration, not just progressively refined the genre but reimagined, reshaped and rewired it until it has become something that can no longer be comfortably placed alongside other types of game because its ambition exists in a different sphere.

The signs were there in *GTAIII*, the 2001 release that showed just how differently Rockstar considered the notion of what a videogame could be all about, its astonishingly engineered mechanics, storyline, technology and soundtrack fusing to create something that wasn't so much a game as it was an *experience*. That *Vice City*, a sequel that built upon its successor in every conceivable manner – and some that were inconceivable at the time – emerged from Rockstar North's studio only a year later is one of modern-day game development's wildest accomplishments. By rights, the successor, *San Andreas*, had no business throwing up any surprises, and yet it punched through

expectations with a sense of breadth and scale unmatched in videogaming as a whole.

Today, we're going to talk about all of these achievements, along with Rockstar's most fizzlingly ambitious work to date, *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

GRAND THEFT AUTO 3D

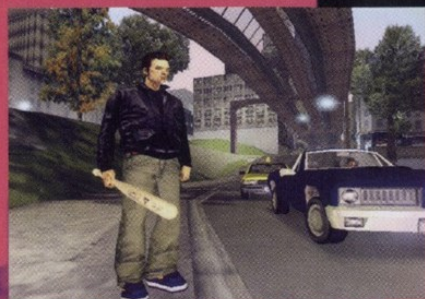
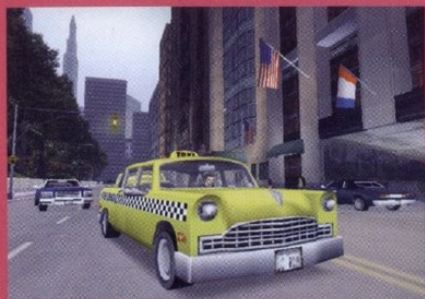
On the city outskirts, a police officer is chasing a young man across a car dealership's parking lot. The man appears unarmed, but the officer has drawn his weapon and is preparing to open fire. In the background, curious bystanders have gathered to see what will unfold. The suspect runs between two cars in a frankly pitiful attempt to hide. "Get in the Humvee, man!" shouts one of the onlookers. He does as he's instructed, fires up the hulking vehicle's engine and slams it into reverse, ramming the robust bodywork squarely into the cop and flattening him.

"YEAH!" shouts one of the bystanders in delighted approval. The rest, probably a dozen of them now, are standing there transfixed by what they're seeing. This is the showfloor of E3 2001. It's the first chance we've had to play *GTAIII*, and we've unintentionally attracted quite an audience.

The game has turned up with little in the way of fanfare, but it leaves an impression on all of those who bother to give it a go. Which turns out to be not as many as Rockstar had hoped, leaving it to be overshadowed by many other titles making debuts this year, not least the company's own mass-scale beat 'em up, *State Of Emergency*.

"I remember our booth at E3 that year and really loving it and feeling like, you know, we've actually got a selection of games here, it's all going on, this is great," says Houser today. "But the game that I was closest to and most proud of was *GTAIII*, and I remember me and Les [Benzies, producer of *GTAIII* and now president of Rockstar North] could not really get arrested with it at that E3. People were not really interested. I was really shocked at the time. I mean, *State Of Emergency*

From Scarface to Taxi Driver, *GTAV* wore its influences on its sleeve, but this only added to its appeal to an older generation of gamers who immediately tuned in to sensibilities that were at odds with what was happening in the gaming scene of 2001



definitely had a great engine, and it was perfect for a trade show, where it was going to be played for five or ten minutes at a time. *GTAIII* wasn't so suitable because it wasn't glossy or spangly – but if you gave it a chance, it took you somewhere special. I definitely remember that E3 made us all a lot hungrier for the game – we were like: 'Well, we'd better put the fucking hammer down now'. So I'm very grateful to E3 for that, if nothing else. And we fucking well did put the hammer down."

It wasn't that *GTAIII* lacked polish in its E3 incarnation, more that it was so different to anything else being shown at the event that many people just didn't get it. Plus, as Houser (pictured right) admits, *GTA2* – a 2D title released three years after gamers had embraced 3D spectacles such as *Tomb Raider* – hadn't sold in the sort of numbers that matched Rockstar's expectations, so awareness of *GTA* as a brand was low.

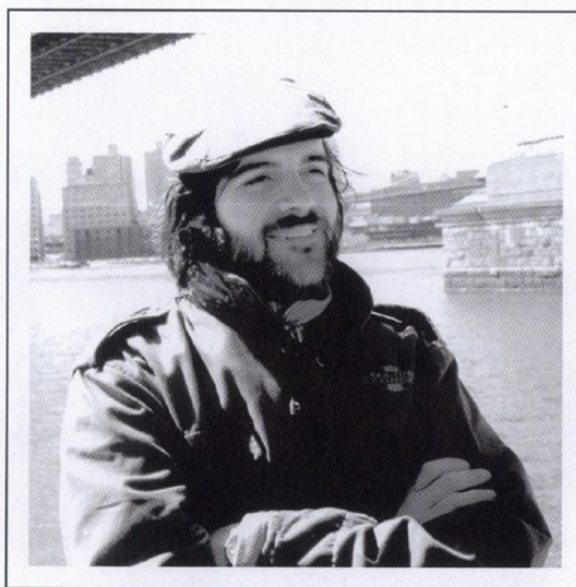
Houser had previously experienced frustrations with *GTA*'s evolution. He recalls the transition from 2D to 3D: "At the end of *GTA2* someone from the team popped up with a version of the game which was in what we described as 2.5D – in real layman's terms it was like an isometric fixed viewpoint, kind of like *SimCity* but with more of a dynamic camera. It was basically the *GTA2* engine but you could play it in 3D and it was mind-blowing. I was like, 'Why don't we get this in there?' But it chugged along, and for whatever reason it wasn't happening, but I remember it really firming up in my mind, and I was here on my own, going, 'Oh, man, if we do this in proper 3D, it's going to be insane'. But separately, the team was working on something that was loosely along those lines. Leslie [Benzie], Obbe [Vermeij, technical director], Adam [Fowler, technical director] and Aaron [Garbut, art director] had just moved to Edinburgh, and their side-project kind of evolved into what *GTAIII* became."

Taking *GTA* from its established 2D roots and into 3D was a bold move, but an obvious one, we suggest. "Bringing it across to 3D was hard, but yeah, it was a very logical thing. And I remember the first time I started to see images of what was going to be created by the team – I was just like: 'That's actually what we can do? That's bananas'. I think the first time I saw a wireframe of a 3D carjack, I was like, 'That is it, right there'. Just, 'Oh, my god'. Just amazing."

The shape of the project began to crystallise, and the team at Rockstar North, with inspiration feeding in from Houser and his brother Dan (originally a writer on *GTAIII* and now vice president of creative at Rockstar) in New York, began to realise its potential. The key to the project's overall success, claims Houser, was collaboration. "I think what was very special about the *GTAIII* development process – and it's something we still cling on to – was the fact that ideas would come into the game from anywhere and everywhere in the company; it was the son of so many great minds and opinions and attitudes and energies, and everybody was just throwing it in the pot. It's an example that's been taken out of

context in the past, but from a pure game-mechanic point of view, the fact that you could go with a hooker and then go and whack her and take your money back, just the game mechanics of that – looking at it completely isolated from the fact that it involves a hooker – were brilliant, I thought. And that was the contribution of just this one guy – that was his bit. And on the soundtrack side we were like, 'Why don't we license the whole soundtrack from *Scarface*? That was pretty weird, right? And if you think about those two extremes and then you apply that across the whole game, every single bit was approached like that, every single bit."

Rockstar North had to innovate in many areas in order to make *GTAIII* stand up, not least in



"AS A FILM NUT, I FELT THAT *GTAIII* DREW A LINE BETWEEN GAMES AND MOVIES. IT FELT LIKE WE WERE TAKING OVER"

spooling the complex, heaving gameworld from the PS2 disc on the fly ("Other developers were doing streaming, but the guys at North just pumped it"), and also in terms of bringing Hollywood acting talent on board to deliver the game's distinctive vocal work. "We had a tight budget so we had a very interesting selection of actors that got involved, but they are people who I think stand the test of time," says Houser. "I remember having Kyle MacLachlan, who did an incredible, very flat kind of delivery for Donald Love, but it sort of worked. He was just on it. And Joe Pantoliano, an incredible character actor – he's the first guy you meet in the game, Luigi. The Sopranos was so hot at the time, and I remember the first time I actually went and got a mission from Luigi, and his voice was actually in, with the right animation, with a little bit of lip synching –

as simple as it was in those days – it was just like, 'Wait a minute – I watched him on the TV last night and now I'm playing and hearing that'. There were so many moments there."

And yet the lead character himself never spoke a word. What, we wonder, is the story behind that? "That was one of those things where I think I only remember noticing kind of late on, like: 'Fuck – he doesn't speak'. And I've never said that to anyone before – I'm being honest here. But I remember thinking, well, it kind of works – who cares? And there's been a lot of debate about these things – like whether his name is Claude Speed, or whether he's this or he's that – and it was a lot less planned out than that. It was a lot more like, we were making a game, the guy needed to do certain things, so obviously we're

going to have to have these sequences. Initially I don't think we even thought of them as cutscenes, but we were always going to do them, and then we started motion-capturing them and we were like, 'Oh, these look quite nice – we can start adding to them'. And this is me speaking purely my opinion, but it was like he didn't need a voice, so he didn't have a voice. But it was one of the things that people really picked up on afterwards, and when you saw them debating you kind of thought, actually, guys, there's a lot less to this than meets the eye."

From the excesses in evidence elsewhere, it seemed that there should've been more to all this than met the eye, not less. Here was a game that succeeded in actually inventing a genre – the free-roaming actioner (or sandbox game, if you want to use a label Houser isn't particularly crazy about) – something that doesn't happen very often, and hardly ever in a manner that is so comprehensively, convincingly realised. It also had a profound effect on Houser's personal view of another form of entertainment. "To me, as a film nut, there was something about *GTAIII* that just drew a line in the sand between games and movies, and it felt like: this is us taking over now. And it may be another ten years or 20 years until that really happens, but to me, I'm never going to be able to go back to, say, an action movie and watch it in the same way, because with *GTAIII*, I'm in it – a movie just isn't relevant in the same way any more. Now, that's a slightly extremist approach, a slightly hardcore approach, but that's how it made me feel. For someone who loves

movies, suddenly I could not sit still and take in a movie in the same way; it wasn't speaking to me in the same way. It's depressing because a large part of my leisure time suddenly took a knock because I couldn't take it seriously any longer. This is also connected with celebrity culture and how this stuff has rolled out. Now, when I watch a movie, I see the actors. I see a guy – whoever the actor is; let's not pick on any one person – who's getting paid \$20 million: he's playing dress-up, he's reading out some lines. By definition he is acting, and there's something fundamentally unbelievable about that if you push it too much in your own head. Something just changed almost overnight. I think September 11 also had something to do with all this as well, because I saw that happening through my apartment window and it was the most real action-movie thing I'd ever seen because it fucking well was real, and no explosions have looked real to me since that point. You see one in the flesh and it's like, 'You can keep your Bruckheimer ones created on computers – that doesn't work any more'."

GTAIII launched in October 2001 and immediately hit the number one spot in the charts, propelled by a mix of frothing reviews and the sort of word of mouth whose value many marketers are only now becoming aware of, its devotees so wrapped up in its heady world that they were compelled to share their stories with anyone who'd listen. And the game kept on selling, remaining at the upper reaches of the charts for the next year. Just about until its successor arrived, in fact.

NOW ENTERING VICE CITY

For *GTA: Vice City*, Rockstar had an obvious direction in which to expand its series: upwards. *GTAIII* had infamously featured an aircraft in the form of the Dodo ("There was an airport in the game so the team had to have a plane in there, and these guys are made in such a way that they couldn't just put a plane in there; it couldn't just be a model, it had to actually work"), but *Vice City* took flight more seriously, introducing helicopters whose vantage points afforded players magnificent views of the dazzling new territory Rockstar North's artists had carefully assembled. The journey towards this point began some years before *GTAIII*, however, as Houser recalls: "When we were doing the London pack on the first *GTA*, the idea we had after that was to do Miami in the '80s, but for one reason or another it didn't come together. So you've got the idea and it's about gangsters and the mobster underculture, and a celebration of all things along those lines, and you think, where do we take this now? With something like the *GTA* series there are a lot of options – you can have more fun in Liberty City, or you can do this or do that – but as we were all talking the idea that seemed to have the most meat on it, the one that had the most material that we could work with – in a lot of areas we're interested in: the vibe, the storytelling, the culture, the fashion, the music and on and on and on –

was Miami in the '80s. To me, it's still hands-down the grooviest era of crime because it didn't even feel like it was crime. You had Cuban hitmen coming across and gunning people down in the street, but it was still celebrated in a sort of haze of cocaine and excess and Ferraris and Testarossas, and it was a totally topsy-turvy back-to-front period of time. It was everything that was crazy about the '80s, and it was in America so it was crazier – and geographically it's the gateway to the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean, and so everything floods in there."

The Scarface influence was already deeply embedded in the *GTA* DNA thanks to the previous game, but a more overt influence on *Vice City* came from a TV series, not a movie. "The thing



"THE EXPECTATION FOR VICE CITY MADE THINGS HARDER. THE OTHER THING IS THAT WE MADE IT IN NINE MONTHS"

that was more of a direct influence was Miami Vice, because it's a little bit later. Scarface is earlier, like '83, and it kind of looks it, but Miami Vice was '84 to '89, about five seasons, 110 or so episodes, and I've seen them all many times. Before you could get them on DVD I bought them off eBay – the crappiest quality VHS copies you've ever seen, and I have them all. But it was an incredibly slick show, and when we were first talking about it, everyone was kind of laughing, like: 'What are you on about?' And I was like, 'No, no, no – it's so slick'. Just in terms of music alone, when you look at the tracks that Miami Vice used, it's an amazing list, and Michael Mann would create these miniature pop videos in every show which would be montages. So his use of music in the show was remarkable. A dream of mine and Dan's is to have a montage in a game, actually.

We're on our way; we'll get it one day – a montage of your experiences set to music. Come on, that's going to be amazing, right? With hard drives in consoles, you know it'll happen."

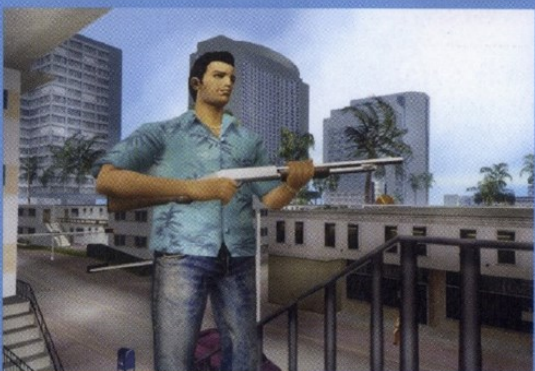
We agree that it's an intoxicating prospect, but before we've got the chance to mull over the finer details of such a feature, Houser's off again. "Then the other thing I loved – and we all loved, actually, although initially there was a lot of arm twisting that had to go on in order to make people watch it – was that each show was kind of like a mission. It may have had a few cool little action sequences in it which were novel, but the overarching story was like a mission, so there was so much cool stuff to take in, whether it was the vehicles they used – incredible cars, incredible helicopters, incredible boats – or whatever. While we were finishing *GTAIII* I would even go home at lunchtimes and watch episodes, and I did that for about a year – it was all I watched."

So Miami Vice conveniently chopped out plenty of ideas that could be appropriated, but engineering them in cohesive game form was hardly a straightforward task, especially coming off the back of *GTAIII*. "Basically, we were following up a game that had surprised us all, so we started the game immediately after we'd finished *GTAIII* and as the months rolled on *GTAIII* became more and more well known and was winning a lot more awards, so the pressure on *Vice City* went up and up and up, along with the expectation. So that definitely made things harder. The other

thing is that we effectively made *Vice City* in nine months, start to finish."

Along with proper flight this time around, and the introduction of motorcycles (necessitating the minor task of engineering and testing a new driving model), one of *Vice City*'s biggest leaps undoubtedly lay in its audio content. Houser's career began in the music business, and his geekily encyclopedic music knowledge has had a direct influence on the soundtracks that have done so much to define the *GTA* experience. Here was a chance to really have some fun. "GTAIII had less well-known music in it. There was some real-world music and there was some fictional music that was made internally. It was a really cool mixture of stuff, but suddenly we'd gone from our in-house music – which was so high-quality but was clearly

Vice City will long be remembered for many things, not least its cast of characters, which included lawyer Ken Rosenberg (voiced by William Fichtner), a nod to *Carlito's Way*. Other stars of the show included the game's dazzling line-up of land, air and sea vehicles



satirical and its own thing – to drum'n'bass and Moving Shadow and all those guys, and the classical music, and the Scarface soundtrack, to Hall and Oates and 99 Luftballons..." We sense that Houser's about to have another of his moments, where he reveals how serious things become when it comes to analysing games that will ultimately bear the Rockstar logo. "And the first time I played the game with the music, when I was over at [Rockstar] North, I was like, 'Whoah'. I had a weird reaction. It felt like crossing a line between the reality and the fiction and all this sort of stuff, and I was like, 'I don't quite know how this is going to work out'. And that spun me out for months. Fortunately there was the strength of some of my colleagues, who were like, 'It's hot as hell – what are you talking about? It's amazing'.



"WHEN WE FINISHED VICE CITY WE WERE LIKE, 'MAN, HOW THE HELL ARE WE GOING TO FOLLOW THIS ONE UP?'"

Because I was the one who dragged everybody down that path, I had a tremendous feeling that my neck was on the line with all the people I looked up to. I mean, initially some of the guys on the team were like, 'The '80s, man? That's a rough one, isn't it?' And I was like, 'Yeah, of course it is. But that's all the more reason to do it.'"

A smoother consideration – at least most of the time – was getting Ray Liotta on board to give a voice to protagonist Tommy Vercetti. "He was a very interesting guy to work with because we had to have him in for quite a long time – it was the most time we've ever had someone like that around, actually – and in some sessions he was so fired up and he was so into it, but then sometimes it'd be like he was in some kind of a hole, and he was very dark and couldn't work. He's a pretty amazing guy, kind of an amazing actor. He's not

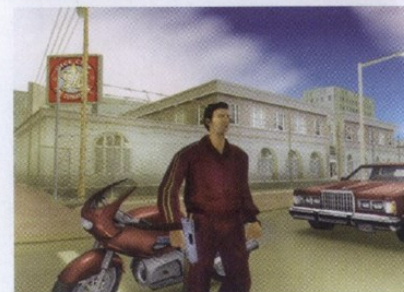
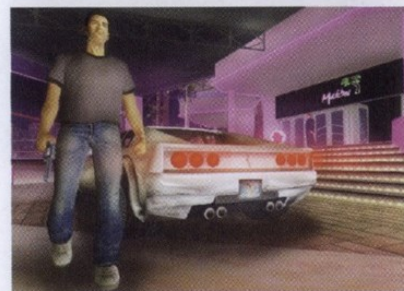
been in as many good things as he should have been, I think. He is so good in Goodfellas that he kind of doesn't need to do anything else, but whatever he's in he always catches your eye because he's got something about him, and in the flesh he's definitely got that about him, too."

But what about when Liotta publicly grumbled about *Vice City*, post-release? "He made some comments later on through his agent, something like, 'Hey, that game was so big I should have charged them more money', and I hate that kind of chat. It's like, be cool. You know? I hate that – it's so cheesy. Like he's saying, 'Next time I'm really going to pin it to them'. Well, how about we just killed off your character? So he doesn't exist – there is no next time. That's how we handle that."

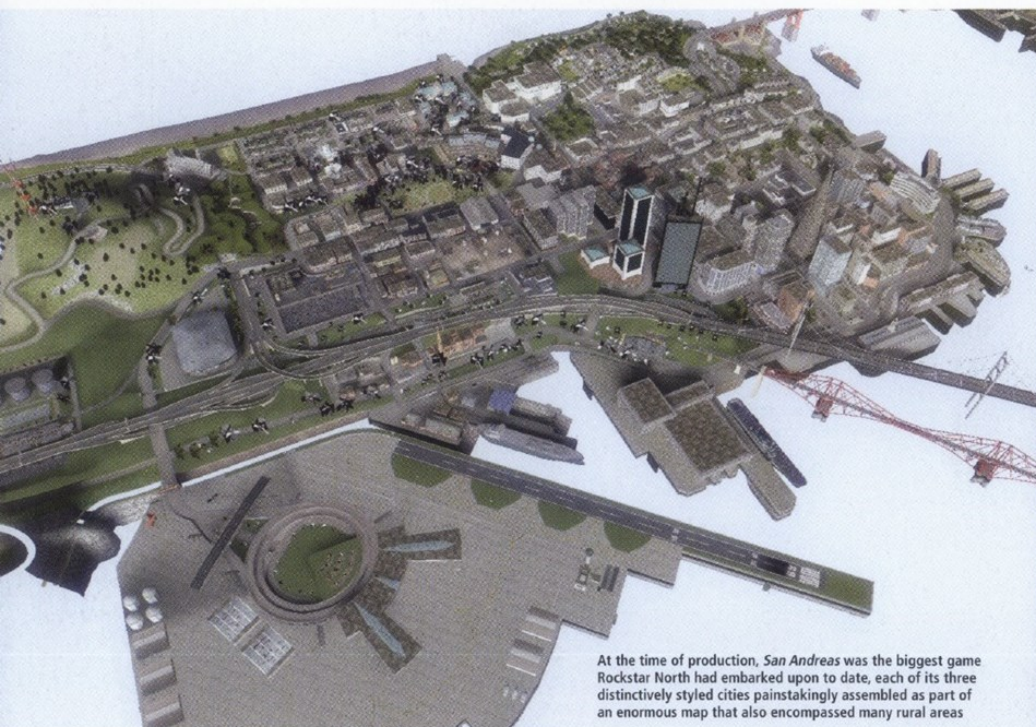
The more we talk about Liotta's inclusion in *Vice City*, the more we realise that we're heading back into the sort of territory which Houser has spent a long time rolling over and over in his head. "Obviously landing Ray Liotta for Tommy Vercetti was a massive project for us, because at the time actors weren't doing things like that, and I think we did a lot to introduce actors being involved in games. And I remember playing *Vice City* and thinking his performance was fantastic, but something in the months afterwards when I was playing it was conflicting in my brain: was I playing Tommy Vercetti or was I playing Ray Liotta? Which is obviously going back to what I said about movies earlier. Who was I, what was going on here, what was happening on

the screen? And it really sort of caught me off guard, and it kept happening to me. It didn't happen to me so much with the other characters but it happened to me with my character because he's an extension of me on the screen. To some extent it left me a bit confused, and it certainly made us resolve for future iterations to dial down the use of famous actors. So if you look at *San Andreas*, there weren't as many in that game. I think that Samuel L Jackson did an absolutely incredible performance as Tenpenny, but he's the biggest star in that game by a long, long way."

Houser's conclusions would have an impact on the next *GTA*, and also the sequel beyond that. "Something happened there and, you know, it's not something that I say is a final decision forever, but certainly I think with Young Maylay, what he did with CJ [in *San Andreas*] made him very, very



More action from the deliriously vivid world of *Vice City*, whose source material resulted in plenty of headaches for Rockstar North's artists. (Houser recalls that there were difficulties involved with capturing neon lighting effects. The finished game's authentic vibe surely made it worth all the pain)



At the time of production, *San Andreas* was the biggest game Rockstar North had embarked upon to date, each of its three distinctively styled cities painstakingly assembled as part of an enormous map that also encompassed many rural areas



human to me, and when I look at what the guy's doing with Niko for *GTA IV*, it's like Niko is a real person to me now, and there's nothing that gets in the way between me and Niko. It's the real thing – he's a real guy and he feels like someone I know, like the ultimate bad-boy character but still a nice bloke sort of thing. There's no doubt in my relationship with him. It's weird to talk about relationships with videogame characters, but I have them. It wouldn't be right to say there was *doubt* between Tommy Vercetti and me, or whatever, it's just that it sowed a seed, and I think we've evolved from that now, and I actually think what we've ended up with is stronger. And also, I'll be honest, it's easier to work with someone who's keen and enthusiastic, and not been in hundreds of films. It's much easier to work with them, and to get good performances in games is very difficult. You know, sometimes you get a famous person in and they literally just read off the script, they want the cheque, and they want to go. I find that insulting and depressing."

The more we talk, the more we understand how much Rockstar's work means to Houser. To him, the concept of games manufactured by production lines is an utterly alien one. The company's projects may be the collaborative work of many talented individuals, but each one benefits from a very personal attachment to the man who ultimately calls the shots, and that enthusiasm and passion shines through.

Vice City may have more zeal and zing than a dozen *Oblivions* or *Halos*, and it may still held be up by many as the best game in the *GTA* series to

date, but Houser seems happy enough that the game succeeded in resonating with players at all, never mind its durability. "When it connected with the audience in a meaningful way it proved a lot about what we'd been thinking and hoping about people feeling about games. You know, you're shooting in the dark and speculating, but when people get it you're like, 'Wow, that's fucking cool. It's not just us tossing our own selves off – people actually get it'. And with that game all of the things we set out to do with it, and all the little details, everyone picked up on everything, and I think that's awesome."

SCALING UP FOR SAN ANDREAS

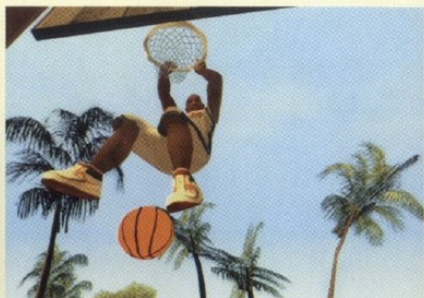
We move on to *San Andreas*, the most critically acclaimed instalment of the *GTA* series to date, but also one which has divided opinion among players, some of whom simply couldn't get their heads around its scale. "Is there any such thing as too big?" asks Houser, evidently aware of such criticisms, and probably tired of them too. "You know, if you don't like driving over that distance, the point of the game is don't go there, then. You don't have to go there. We give the people an infinite amount of choice, and for every person who felt it was too big there were probably a fair amount that really got off on the scope of the whole thing, and wanted to take one of those single-propeller aircraft through the canyons. There were amazing things to go and do and it really took the whole toyset element to another sort of place. But it was big, there are no two ways about it. The story was big, the world was

big, everything was big. But when we finished *Vice City* we were like, 'Man, how the hell are we going to follow this one up?'"

The answer, of course, was to build the action around not a city but an entire state. Despite such grand scale, though, the starting point – a neighbourhood, surrounded by friends and family – feels intimate. It was an area on which Houser was particularly focused. "While we were doing *Vice City*, and even before that, the era we knew we could have fun with, well, what's after Miami in the '80s? Well, of course, the Bloods and the Crips and the LA early-'90s gang-banger culture. I remember being in the UK at the time it was going off and being completely fascinated and terrified by it. Fascinated by how they looked – they dress amazingly – but these guys are all like soldiers, and are treated like armies, and this is very serious, scary stuff. And, as we were thinking and talking more about it, the idea that you could play an African American character became more appealing. Because not many games had done that at that point. A few, but not many."

We ask Houser if at any point Rockstar felt as if it was taking a risk by using a black lead, not only because gaming is often lazily depicted as being a predominantly white pursuit. "We immediately embraced it – I didn't see it as a risk because I don't have any lines between these things. But I became aware, as the project moved forward, that it was something of a risk. It was certainly leftfield for the industry at that time but, you know, I'm proud to do things like that, and anyone who has a problem with that, we don't

San Andreas' storyline presented a significant step forward for the series' sense of narrative, and those who played it to its conclusion were rewarded by being able to deal out some comeuppance to one of gaming's most charismatic bad eggs



want you buying the game anyway, mate, quite frankly. So we had the vibe figured out quite early on, but then in terms of the gameplay, well, how do you follow the previous games? So the idea came about to really improve the connection between you and your character, to really let him be a projection of what you want to be."

This opportunity for customisation became another component that didn't necessarily tally with consumers' expectations, but Houser stands by Rockstar's direction. "One of the things we are fascinated by is this notion of digital ownership – owning things that I think do exist but which don't necessarily technically by normal people's standards exist; I mean, CJ doesn't sit here next to me, he's in the machine. And people don't realise that *San Andreas* is as much of an RPG as anything. It's the most immersive RPG in some ways, I think, because there are no bars or sliders or tables – you can shape CJ however you want to shape him, but you shape him through your actions, and to me the idea of doing that in a game that's as consoley as a *GTA* game, I just thought was so cool. Obviously, again, it was one of those ideas that in the course of development we all became increasingly neurotic about. You know: 'What are we doing here? We've made *GTA* uber-nerdy in a way with this stuff – will people get it?' And I have to say, when the game came out and I started seeing people's photostories of the way they'd taken their character and then taken them on a journey and made little comics out of them, I was like, 'Yeah, people get it, no problem'."

We talk more about RPG content, but Houser returns to the topic of scale. He's acutely aware that it's been an issue, but perhaps he feels that he hasn't clarified where the team was coming from. "It was definitely massive, but the games had kind of become known for being big by that point. I think the scale is epic, and it is a bit of a journey, it is a bit of an odyssey – you know, the journey of this gang-banger from the 'hood who goes and finds himself getting involved with the CIA and, yeah, it's very, very fantasy, very fictional – I mean, the guy's parachuting out of private jets. We really went bonkers with it and it touches on a lot of different flavours and themes and so on, but it's interesting to talk about that because I'm very protective of it. I don't want that game being remembered for Hot Coffee. One of my fears when the Hot Coffee thing happened was that it was going to take this really beautiful piece of work and it was just going to be known for something else."

It's nearly time to stop looking at the past and start talking about the present, so we ask Houser to pick his favourite bit of *San Andreas* – a tall order considering just how much you can do within its dizzying world. "It was just amazing being out there in this enormous world, on your own. When we were making it, one of the things I talked about – and thank god they didn't give in to my idiocy – was, 'Hey, we've got to make it

interesting to drive four hours on a freeway and you have to stop to fill up on fuel', and the team were like, 'God, give it a rest, mate'. But it did take quite a long time to drive from Los Santos to Las Venturas or San Fierro, and that sense of journeying – but completely immersively in that gameworld – I thought that was very, very cool. As I sit here and think about it, I've done those journeys in real life, and obviously they're shrunk down a bit for the game, but they still feel epic, they still feel enormous, and getting that across in a game was no mean feat."

GTAIV AND THE NEW BEGINNING

And so the biggest *GTA* project to date hoves into view. Not the biggest in geographical terms, but certainly in every other respect. Rockstar



"I SUGGESTED THAT IN SAN ANDREAS YOU SHOULD HAVE TO FILL UP WITH FUEL. THE TEAM SAID, 'GOD, GIVE IT A REST'"

embarked on it with a mixture of trepidation, determination and, as was to be expected by now, the desire to shake things up a bit. "When we set out for this game it was, again, 'Oh my god, following up *San Andreas* is a nightmare'," explains Houser. "A good nightmare, but a nightmare. And then with the new hardware it set a new kind of expectation: people are really going to expect something bloody cool and very progressive and very evolved from anything that's gone before in a big way. So we had a lot of discussions about where to set it, but a more realistic Liberty City very quickly became the favourite option. For a lot of reasons, it just works – it works physically and it also works in terms of vibe. There are a lot of different energies going on here in a small area so you can get away with it – it won't be weird, or forced, or phoney. And when

we were looking at the lead character we felt that a lot of the Italian American and traditional east coast gangster themes had been a little bit played out – a little bit hammered, actually..." Houser isn't referencing any other game by name, but we're assuming he must have had at least a session or two with *Saints Row* (probably the most cynically derivative game of modern times, it should be said) in the process of reaching these conclusions, which have resulted in a vibe for *GTAIV* that, at least from the outset, feels markedly different. "Whether or not we have reset it correctly, I can't tell you that. I can tell you how I feel about these eastern European guys now. I'm as enamoured with them as I ever have been with any of our characters, so I've done the job for myself, and that's a good start. The more

we dug about and researched, the more fascinating the eastern European situation became. You've got people who came here 15 years ago who may have been involved in very intense, terrifying conflicts in eastern Europe, and they've experienced the sort of post-communist meltdown that's taken place. Some of these people have been in wars, and they all split – everyone went everywhere. I think these people are simply fascinating."

We begin talking about the reception of *GTAIV* to date, and how it has already built a reputation for representing a shift in mood for the series. Where are we headed here? "The audience is getting a little older – the guys who were playing *GTAIII* are now

seven years older. People who were ten when *GTAIII* originally came out can now legitimately play it in this country, and a lot has happened in those seven years. The game has to become more and more thematically sophisticated and mature without losing its *GTA*-ness, and its edginess, and its humour, and its self-deprecation – all those things. And that's why when the first trailers for *GTAIV* came out, people were like, 'Oh my god, they've gone so serious'. Well, no, we haven't. Yes, there's a seriousness to it, but it's still *GTA*, and I think this is one of the things that is very special about this game, and this applies to all the disciplines involved: everything feels like it's moved on or moved up while still being very much part of the *GTA* series. So it doesn't turn anyone off that loved all the fun stuff from before – it's all still there. And it's crazier than ever, in a way – the

humour is madder than ever. It's more full-on than ever, definitely."

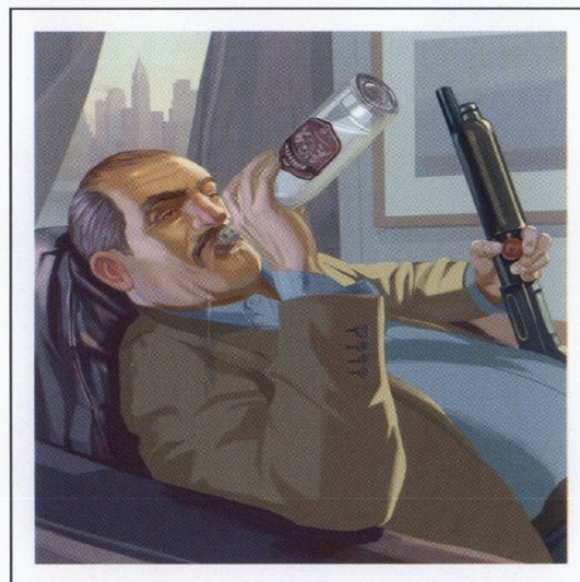
But, we propose, the first trailer, which by definition lays down an overarching tone for the production, painted a dark picture of both the lead character, with his voiceover talking of the grubby events of his past, and also the game as a whole. "The trailer was heavy, yes. It was, and I would say the game as a whole definitely is darker, but that's because the resolution of the experience is greater. So if you think about playing *GTAIII* or *San Andreas* in this resolution, we'd have to harden and toughen up the tone because the characters would look that much more real and the place would look that much more real. Everything would have that much more weight to it. It was like a natural evolution."

During a demo of the game we encounter two Italian American characters, and suddenly this new take on the *GTA* universe feels more like the old *GTA*, and somehow more comfortable. We're used to Italian American characters thanks to years of flicks such as *Goodfellas* and *Casino* and the established romanticisation of the mafia lifestyle, and in this instance our brains are being lazy by latching on to what is familiar. We haven't seen nearly so many films focusing on Eastern European gangsters, and that relative lack of reference points explains why the lead players in *GTAIV*'s world feel so new, and certainly more foreign than before. They key issue, perhaps, is that they're authentic. How authentic? That's something Houser fretted over when he went to see *Eastern Promises*, David Cronenberg's 2007 movie focusing on the very type of gangster figures that feature in *GTAIV*. "I was nervous about watching it, thinking that he was really going to hand us our heads on a plate in term of delivering the vibe. Cronenberg's like the master of atmosphere. So I thought: this is going to be scary. And yes, he's got some good Russian vibes in there, he's definitely taken with the same things that we're taken with – all the tattoos and the craziness, he's definitely got. The only criticism I would give him – and he is one of my absolute favourite film makers; *Dead Ringers* is one of my absolute favourite films of all time – is that Viggo Mortensen is Danish American, or something like that; he sure as hell is not eastern European. He's good, but he's not eastern European. And the other main character is played by Vincent Cassel, who is a good actor, but he's French. So the two lead Russians are not played by Russians, and they don't sound Russian to me. Vincent sounds like a French bloke doing a Russian accent – I can hear the French in him. And when I came back to our game, Vlad and Faustin, the two heavyweight Russian guys in the game, are very real, very Russian, and very fucking scary."

Despite the new setting, it's tempting to look at *GTAIV* as the game Rockstar always intended the 3D interpretation of *GTA* to be, partly because its visual fidelity more closely matches the sources of inspiration that have

driven the series to date. "I think ultimately we wanted to really connect players with a true *GTA* experience, but one in which everything has been cranked up by the power the consoles now give us, so that we really re-engage them – that was the goal. So we focused on making everything have more weight, and more consequences, and more meaning. Like going from spraying a gun to having each squeeze of a trigger actually being something that you feel – that was something we were very focused on."

Physical issues underpin much of what is new about *GTAIV*, and serve to give life to its intricately modelled components. Engineers from NaturalMotion have been working on-site at Rockstar North for months at a time to stitch in the company's Euphoria procedural animation



"WHEN I SAW EUPHORIA, I WAS FLOORED. I WAS LIKE, THAT'S MY DREAM – IT'S HAPPENING, IT'S THERE, LET'S DO IT"

technology, introducing a bespoke, heavily integrated solution, not something simply bought off the shelf. The results are truly transformative, and evident right from the moment you begin to move Niko around the gameworld, his body shape cambering as he moves left and right while running, his feet properly connecting with steps and other topographical features. It's tech that drives the behaviour of NPCs, too, and the result is something that does more justice to the 'living, breathing world' tag so frequently attached to the *GTA* series. This is a genuine evolutionary step, and Rockstar and NaturalMotion deserve enormous recognition in getting here.

"The animation, generally, I thought was one of the biggest things that had to jump forward," explains Houser, warming to a topic that is evidently something of an obsession. "Anything

else was going to jump forward – you know, the artistry as a whole was going to be that much more beautiful – but animation is very difficult, a bit of a black art in some ways. It's really difficult to get character out of these motions. It completely fascinates me, and intimidates me, too. I've been totally fascinated with the notion of procedural animation for years, as have a number of other people, and praying for it for a long time. The first time I saw Toby Gard and *Galleon*, the way it was animated was amazing. James Miller, who was his animation programmer, works with us in San Diego, and he's brilliant. And all these different people, together with Sandy Roger who handles that side of things for *GTA*, came together and made it happen. When we initially saw Euphoria, I was floored. I was like, 'That's my

dream – it's happening, it's there, let's do it'. But all the realists who actually have to make the stuff were like, 'Sam, man, it's never going to work, it's never going to happen'. I think initially it was very much pitched as something to use for cutscenes, to have a really cool-looking action of someone falling down the stairs or whatever. But there was a bunch of guys in our crew who really looked at it and they were like, 'I think we can actually get this running in the game, in realtime'. So it's been incredibly collaborative, which I love, and I think the fruits of it are amazing. When you're taking a shot at somebody and they go staggering procedurally, and they lift up their gun to try and get a shot back at you – it's giving people unique moments like they never had before."

Another piece of middleware at the heart of the *GTAIV* experience comes from Image Metrics, which facilitates intricate facial expressions and smooths out the process of incorporating lip-synching. With so many thousands of lines of dialogue in their repertoires, it is important that *GTAIV*'s expansive cast deliver them with some kind of conviction, and the beguiling results instantly make mannequins of the populace of previous *GTA*s. The sophistication of your interactions with other characters becomes especially pronounced when members of the opposite sex become involved, and we ask Houser about a possible love interest this time around. "There are girlfriends. There are girls you can date off of the internet and things like that, and there are a couple of interesting... well, I don't want to give anything away, but yes, relationships in

GTAIV's hand-to-hand combat may be tangibly evolved, but its selection of weaponry – and the wielding of it – is refined, too, something that really feeds into play when you're using a sniper rifle. A love interest? There'll be plenty of that, too, apparently



general in games are important; I think relationships in games are fascinating. Having a relationship that's been thrown up on the screen pretty much procedurally, and having feelings for one character or another, I think is immense, and I haven't played a game where you feel as much about the characters, both good and bad. The characters you don't like here, you *really* don't fucking like, and you'll be happy when you dispatch them. It will feel like you've done something. And the characters are so well developed – they've been modelled beautifully, then they've been animated brilliantly, and the writing's great, and the acting's great, and it all lines up so you can really get a sense of whether you do or don't like them. And not everyone will like or dislike the same people."

The backdrops against which these characters play out their stories are modelled beautifully, too. Rockstar has long had a full-time research team employed at its HQ, and for *GTA IV* the Rockstar North team made two lengthy trips to New York – bringing up to 50 people at a time – in order to further get to grips with both the territory and the people who populate it. "I don't even know what the number is, but the team took tens of thousands of photos," says Houser. "We went bloody bonkers with it, quite frankly. Now, all the people in the game feel like people that you would meet or come across – certainly living here in New York, which can be a bit of a freakshow. And when we've been working on the game for so long it can get very blurry in your head because..." He pauses, possibly because he thinks what he's about to say may make Liotta's appraisal seem like an accurate one. "I was away for two weeks in Edinburgh, and when I came back here I didn't feel like I'd left, because I'd been here the whole time [via Liberty City in *GTA IV*]. And I'm not saying that to be funny. I remember: I was coming over the bridge on my first day back to work and I'm like, *why doesn't this feel different?* Because I've been doing it 50 times a day while I was there, and I felt it."

When he's asked about his favourite activities in *GTA* games, Houser often talks about just cruising their environments, listening to music, soaking up the atmosphere. Lately, though, he's been spending more time on foot. "I can play *GTA IV* for a day just going around getting into punch-ups in the street, and I think it's pretty good at doing that considering what it actually is – the fact that you can have these complex fights in 3D as opposed to, say, *Street Fighter* where you're on a 2D plane. And you can feel each punch as it goes in. I'm not trying to labour these points but that was really the goal from day one – to give people the most detailed, weighted experience possible so that they really think about what they're doing. And it can really connect with them, so whether it's the street fighting or gun combat or the driving of the vehicles or the interaction with other characters or any number of other elements that make up the game,



Snapping to cover works with both static and dynamic surfaces, and serves to layer in a new dimension to *GTA*'s combat. Don't get too uptight about Niko's threads (above), incidentally: *GTA IV* features a range of clothes stores to feed your fashion needs

everything has been taken to this new place. So, absolutely, this is how we always wanted *GTA* to be, but it simply wasn't possible until now. And some of the technology that's gone into this new game, compared to what we had before, it's shocking. It's shocking about videogames in general. It's like, my god, compare it to, say, the film industry, where ultimately not much changed in the last 50 years – well, in the last ten years CG's taken over and kind of ruined things. But with games you take what you were doing – and you were maxing it out – and you throw it all away. And now look what you can do."

We talk for a while about the implications of moving *GTA* to a new generation of hardware – how the process of testing is ramped up to an almost ludicrous degree; how the company as a whole manages to keep its secrets secret when so many more people are required to be in the production loop; the processes involved in finding and signing voice talent, and then getting them in for recording sessions; the motion-capture sessions; the incorporation of two new slices of middleware that fundamentally drive the way the game looks; the process of establishing new radio stations, resurrecting old ones, writing and producing the DJ banter that helps to bring them to life, not to mention the content for the dedicated talk stations; and more.

In strict gameplay terms, though, *GTAIV* may be at its most tangibly evolved when you're simply seeing how it all unfolds. The ability to tackle missions your own way has always been a defining principle of the series, and with so many more variables in the mix this time around, the opportunity for emergent activity is only more pronounced. "I think the fact of the matter is, after this long of playing the game, unexpected things are happening to me all the time," says Houser. "And I'm bloody jaded and bloody cynical, and I'm the first to complain about things, but this actually is doing that. I'll be getting in a battle with some guys, I'll steal someone's car and some fist fight's kicked off, and then suddenly he'll be chasing me through the street, and I'll get in position – like, 'I'm not running from you any more; I'm going to fucking have it with you now, mate' – and just as I'm about to crack him, a car comes flying through the shops, runs him over, and he goes flying. And these tiny little moments happen more per square inch – or per square pixel or whatever – than I ever dreamt possible, and it's the organic nature of all the elements that have come together, and particularly the procedural animation via the NaturalMotion content, that allow the experience to be unique. There really are lots of ways to play these missions."

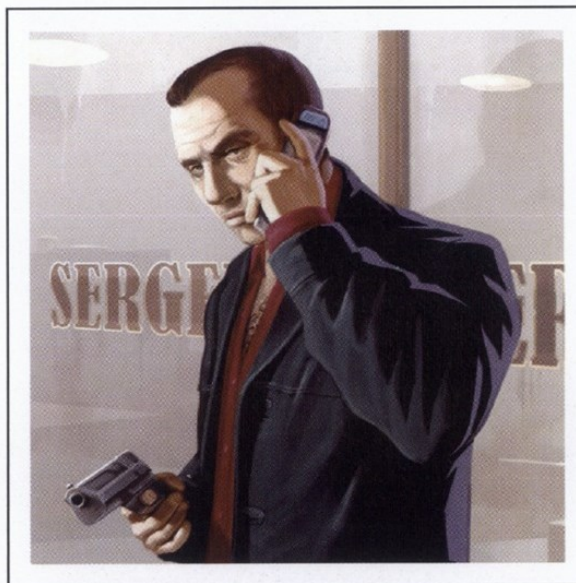
Taking down enemies who navigate the gameworld in much the same way as yourself goes some way towards levelling the playing field, and we're certain that *GTAIV* has missions in store to sit alongside rescuing Lance Vance in *Vice City*. Something working in the player's favour this time around, however, is a weapon-targeting system that has been refined beyond recognition.

"I always could target whoever I wanted to hit in the previous games, but that's not to dismiss the audience's reaction to that stuff because, well, if people say that then something must be wrong," concedes Houser. "I think we've introduced a level of targeting control that most gamers, from the hardcore to the absolute mainstream, will be able to play and have fun with. You can free-aim if you want to play totally like a balls-out hardman – be my guest, awesome. If you want to just snap from target to target it will work like that, and if you want to – and this is what I do, trying to be Mr Cool [laughs] – is target and then modify, so I can latch on to you and then headshot you. And it's very satisfying, and I think and I hope that most people's gripes and reservations with the previous targeting systems

to a different level, and in concert with some of the game's other bold innovations it stands up as, dare we say it, what the term 'next generation' is supposed to mean.

We've been focusing on the more violent aspects of *GTAIV*, but it has innovations to spare, too, when you're not engaged in blowing your enemies' balls off. During the demo we noticed what sounded like a radio station dedicated to big bands – a first for *GTA*, and one whose output provides a different kind of contrast – and we ask Houser for clarification. "My dad was one of the directors of [legendary London jazz venue] Ronnie Scott's for many years, so finally we were like, 'Let's do jazz properly'. And he's a real bloody jazz snob so he gave us these tracks and these tracks only – you know, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Coltrane – and that'll be for people like the classical music was in *GTAIII*. It's very New York and it feels great. But I could go on – there's a lot of music in the game, an awful lot, and a lot of exclusive stuff, a lot of new stuff. It has been very, very important for it to feel as 'now' as we could possibly make it while still having great music. And the beauty of radio, particularly in the US, is that they play a lot of classics alongside new tracks, so when you play the game it feels like the radio feels here – you hear a brand-new record you've never heard before or you hear one of your favourites."

Sitting back and listening to Liberty City's diverse line-up of radio is one thing; taking in its selection of extracurricular



THE COMEDY CLUBS ARE PROOF THAT HOUSER ISN'T MESSING ABOUT WHEN HE SAYS THIS *GTA* IS CRAZIER THAN EVER

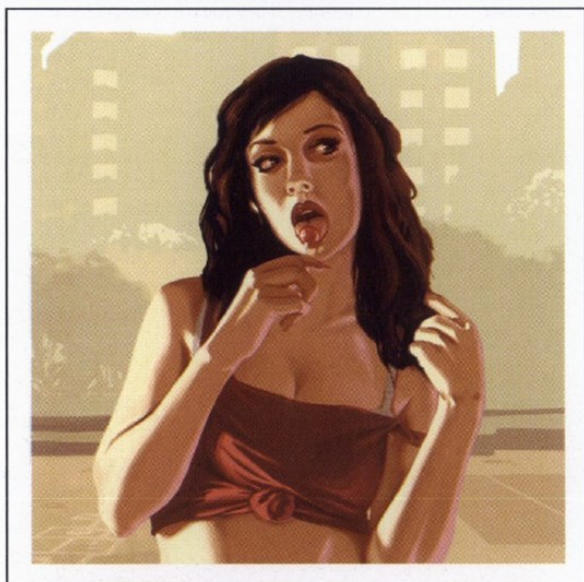
have all been addressed – and then some."

We only get the opportunity to take part in a dozen or so firefights, but the confusion that sometimes clouded the action in previous *GTAs* has certainly been removed. In fact, these encounters are so focused and so dynamic that they feel more scripted than they actually are, like they're taking place inside the carefully funnelled, closely governed spaces of other games, not as part of this procedurally driven city sprawl. The lock-to-objects cover system (and its blind-firing mechanic) also builds a new dimension into *GTAIV*'s combat, and comes into its own when you're able to piece together a strategy on the fly and, say, make use of a car that's just been turned over in front of you as a shield, since you can lock to dynamic objects, too, not just static items such as concrete walls. It is *GTA*, but it is *GTA* elevated

activities quite another. When meeting up with friends you're able to go out drinking, bowling or for a game of darts (Houser claims to be particularly handy with the arrows). Then there are the strip joints and, perhaps more unexpectedly, comedy clubs, which have been incorporated in a manner that is enough to make your head spin. Houser happily explains what the game has in store in this respect, but unfortunately we're not allowed to talk about it here. He wants people who go out and buy the game to discover it first-hand for themselves. "It's mad," he concludes. We have to agree. It does sound mad. And solid proof, in fact, that Houser wasn't messing about earlier when he said that this *GTA* is crazier than ever.

Another area Houser doesn't want us to talk about too specifically right now is downloadable

content (currently set for appearance only on Xbox 360 thanks to a deal put in place with Microsoft rumoured to involve \$50m), but he does hint at it feeding into random missions that stand alongside the traditional story arc. "In the game, you might be walking around and then someone will come up to you and say something like, 'Hey, I need your help', and you'll be like, 'What? This isn't a story mission', and he'll be like, 'You see that room up there? That's my wife and she's fucking some bloke, and I need you to go and do...'" and this little story will unfold from there just randomly. The opportunity for things like that [with DLC] I would say is enormous. Really, though, for the downloadable content in general, it's about seeing how people get turned on by the game, and then we will tailor the production. We



"PEOPLE TALK ABOUT MORAL DILEMMAS IN GAMES, BUT SOME OF THE THINGS IN GTAV HAVE REAL CONSEQUENCES"

are very tuned into the reactions of the audience and we will go a certain way or another."

We're beginning to think that GTAV's DLC may be more peripheral than we'd been expecting, but Houser is quick to assure us that it will, in fact, be substantial. "I think the mission packs with the episodes are going to be pretty deep, offering another full-on adventure in this world. I think we will be in a position to market them not a million miles away from the way the boxed game is marketed."

We wonder how making a game that's never actually finished impacts on the development team over in Edinburgh. It's not a consideration that can be simply brushed aside, is it? "Yeah, it feels like it's a step towards something that we get asked about a lot, which is getting towards it being more of a subscription type of game, which

is something that GTA will ultimately lend itself to rather well at a certain point in time. In that case you'd have your team that makes the initial disc and then there's what I would describe almost like a 'live' team who are creating stuff."

We're reminded of a conversation we had with Phil Harrison just prior to the PlayStation 2 launch, at which point he foresaw a future in which new episodes of certain high-profile games would be delivered just as TV shows, with trailers encouraging consumers not to miss, say, Friday's episode. Will GTAV be marketed that way beyond the boxed copy? "I don't know the answer to that specifically right now, but I would say probably yes. Assuming people like this game then my sense is that they will probably like the episodes, and if they like the episodes it will probably make

sense to market them aggressively, and we want people to be there on that first day as much as is realistic. Our goal will be to fry those Xbox Live servers – we want to have as many people tune in at that moment as possible. If our experience with the trailers is anything to go by, people are very hungry and very tuned in. People are paying attention in a way that I think is immense, and it blows my mind when you put a trailer out there and you think, well, we've only really told the hardcore gamers about this, and then suddenly there are ten million people seeing it in three days. People aren't messing around, and so I think, assuming things go to plan, they will really get into the episodes. And I think that they'll be respectful of the consumer in terms of pricepoint –

you'll get a lot of content for your money, which I think is really important. You know, there are too many stories at the moment of people having the feeling that they're not getting enough for their money in terms of downloadable content, and it's easy for publishers to get away with it. I think that, when you put this game in the machine, and you've spent £50 or £60 on it, you're getting your value for money. You're getting a bloody big adventure. Is it too big? I don't know." Maybe it will be by the time you've finished. "It might be. It certainly is big, definitely. But again, I'll go back to what I said earlier: it's a good problem to have. And I never want people feeling that we've duped them in any way, shape or form. That's something that we've been into from the beginning."

So, what about multiplayer? It's another feature – or rather suite of features – Houser

isn't able to discuss in detail today, but he does mention being able to get together online in the game with no goal other than using it as a meeting place. "I'm like, 'Do you want to come and hang out for a chat?' And I'll meet you online and we'll get in a car, just listen to music and drive around together, talking, and your 3D model's sat there in the car next to me. That's sublime to me. I might be weird, but I like doing things like that."

We've been talking for hours, but when it comes to this GTA, there are so many details packed in there that we could be here for days. The sat-nav systems, with their spoken instructions, fitted in the more expensive cars, for example. The fact that some vehicles have beautifully shiny paintjobs that reflect the world around them, while the bodywork of old bangers is dull, matt and lifeless. The fact that vehicles get dirty over time – and that you can do something about it by rolling them through a carwash. Being able to use the radio facility on your mobile phone in order to take in the game's many stations while on foot. The new explosion effects, which blast fiery, smoky plumes huge distances into the air. The sandy shorelines, with their discarded tyres and other pieces of junk, and the footprints you leave on both the dry and the glisteningly wet sand. The buoys that bob in the water. The water itself, whose surface reflects the late evening sun to create the kind of evocative scene it feels almost neglectful to not stand and soak up for a while. The spray on the camera lens as you hammer a powerboat down the harbour, and the bassy booms that accompany its bounces across the waves. The Poop Deck seafood restaurant. The golf centre, with its caged driving range. The forklift driver who's having a break from his work and standing around smoking (giving you plenty of opportunity to steal his wheels and take them for a spin, only to curse the fact that forklifts aren't renowned for their agility or speed, leaving your ambitious attempt to jump one over a skip ending in upside-down calamity). The fact that driving slowly up to pedestrians sees them defensively raise their hands towards your vehicle's bonnet rather than blindly ignore you until they've been turned into jam. The newspapers that cascade over the street when you collide with their flimsy vending boxes. The fact that some drivers – the frail elderly, for example – can be swiftly removed from their vehicles, while younger, burlier types prove more stubborn and necessitate some additional persuasion via the end of your boot. The incidental dialogue intertwined right through the experience which gives even more life to this world (sample offering from a particularly impolite police officer we've stopped in front of simply to eyeball: "I'm a cop... and you're a dickhead"). The slightly dodgy-looking Japanese hot hatch with its tiny, almost unnoticeable logo which tells us that its engine features Invariable Valve Timing. The damage you can do to interior walls, ripping chunks out of plaster with gunfire. The you'd-only-ever-find-them-in-GTA companies such as

RS Haul (slogan: 'We'll dump your load') and the TW@ internet cafe chain. The realistically modelled bullet holes in car bodywork that stay where you've shot them. The grubbily authentic graffiti. The police computer system that flicks through portraits of suspects like something out of a Tony Scott movie. The Liberty City road surface, a patchwork jumble of variously hued tarmac that looks like it's been bedding in for years. The simple fact that, for the first time in a *GTA* game, you can change weapons while driving. The intricate overpasses. The subway system. Hanging from your fingertips on building exteriors and shimmying your way into more trouble. The people standing around at the side of the road, looking under car bonnets. The fog. The neon. The Walk/Don't Walk signs. The laundromats and nail parlours and drug stores that flavour the city streets. Queen's One Vision. Alexander O'Neal's Criticize. The \$5 toll bridge (whose fee you can, naturally, ignore, so long as you're up for smashing through a barrier). The lampposts which don't simply fold over but buckle in a shower of sparks. The ubiquitous depth-of-field effects. The

binmen who hold on to the rear of moving trash vans. Middle (not Central) Park. DJ Lazlow. Becoming distracted in the middle of a firefight by the sight of a jet heading across the sky from Liberty City Airport to who knows where. *That* comedy club content. And just looking across the river, at night, running your eyes across the twinkling lights of the city skyline. Imagining all of the possibilities that exist over there. *Knowing* that it's going to be a blast. And, just as before, that you'll want to share your stories with friends.

"In terms of the story as a whole, I think there are so many brilliant little twists and brilliant little nuances and decisions that you have to make," says Houser as the interview is brought to a close. "People talk a lot about some of the things in games like *Mass Effect*, where you create these moral dilemmas – well, we haven't really been making a big deal out of that stuff, but a lot of the things you are going to have to do in *GTAIV* will have real consequences, without wanting to give any of it away. Towards the end there are some very big things that happen that absolutely change things in an 'Oh, tell me that didn't just

happen' kind of a way. Not always good, either."

Clearly such nuance isn't something we're able to take in from our demo session. Instead, encouraged by a Rockstar staffer to simply see some sights, our last taste of the game is a drive to the airport, where we crash through a security barrier and drive on to the runway. A jumbo jet is taxiing for take-off and, for a laugh, we match its speed and pull up to within eyeing distance of the pilot. Then things begin to go wrong. Our wanted level leaps from one star to four, and suddenly a helicopter searchlight is cutting its way through the night sky and on to our position. Gunfire threatens to explode our vehicle so we bail out, and limp away. We have no idea where we're going, and soon yield to the attentions of the law, vowing to return here one day, better prepared.

A measure of any game is how much you think about it when you're not playing it. In the days that follow our time with *GTAIV*, we can think of little else. Soon, the wider gaming world will be obsessed with it, too, and Sam Houser will have to begin thinking about where Rockstar Games can possibly go next.

The scale of the *GTAIV* project comes into focus when you consider that, excluding audio from talk radio stations, commercials, DJ banter, jingles and its many cutscenes, it features in the region of 80,000 lines of spoken dialogue







WORLDS OF SOUND

INDUSTRY EXPERTS TALK GAME AUDIO – AND WHY IT NEEDS ITS OWN REVOLUTION

Game design lecturer **Tom Betts** is feeling pretty downbeat about the attitude of his students toward videogame audio: “Unfortunately it often comes down to the fact that while you can play a game with the sound off, you can’t play a game with the screen off.” If you’re studying what makes a videogame work, sound comes way down the list. Why should his students worry about audio when there are so many other things to worry about? “It’s been an underdog for years,” says Betts.

His students’ attitude is understandable, of course, because games have always been such a potent visual medium. Even the most successful sound designers, such as **Marty O’Donnell** whose work defined the *Halo* series, recognise that sound takes second place for our attention. “We get tangible information from our eyes and more intangible information from our ears; most people don’t think about what they’re hearing,” says O’Donnell. “We can gate our senses, but our ears never blink.” He points out that even though film directors such as Steven Spielberg put great emphasis on sound design, it generally only gets a passing credit. “Perhaps it’s fair sound takes a back seat because that’s how we’re wired, but those of us who are sound designers know how much influence we actually have.”

The truth is that sound design has become one of game development’s most sophisticated tasks. Designing music and sound effect systems for games is a rather different challenge from that of composing music or the soundtracks of film and TV. Games present some unusual problems, the mix having to adjust itself to suit a situation created by the player rather than a static vision. Game designers need a flexible attitude towards factors such as the amount of time spent listening to the same piece of music

and the potential for too many sounds to be played at once. Not only that, but many sound designers find themselves working on tasks that are defined entirely by non-musicians and the audio-illiterate: producers and lead game designers. It can be a serious challenge.

Audio, like so much else in a game, has to convey information to a player. CryTek’s **Florian Füsslin** explains that *Crysis*’ lavish soundscape was defined primarily by what the player needs to hear: “We often went for the concept ‘less is more’ or ‘important things first’. We used a pretty solid priority system which cuts quiet or unimportant sounds in an audio-busy situation like combat. Together with the right mix we were able to provide a dense soundscape in all situations players might run into.” So creep through a jungle and you might be overwhelmed by the ambience, but enter combat and your attention is allowed to adjust instantly to the yells of enemies and the position of their gunfire.


Realism often has to take a back seat in the audio systems that games create, even a game with otherwise realistic environments like *Crysis*, as Füsslin explains: “Making game audio is a balancing act between realism and keeping it ‘readable’ for the player. For example, two assault rifles might sound similar in reality, but in the game the player has to know precisely which weapon has fired. In this case the readability was

more important and therefore given the priority.” Games are often hugely truncated in the sensory input that they offer, and so audio has to function in a manner that supports what gamers can already see on the screen. The clearer the message, the better.

Another famous example of sound as a readable gameplay cue came from Eric Brosius in the *Thief* games. His team put a great deal of work into things like footsteps, which enabled the player to instantly know whether he was being stealthy or not. Noisy metal floors and

LOW IN THE MIX

Introversion’s Chris Delay on the enormous importance of audio to his multiplayer wargame, *Defcon*: “*Defcon* was essentially an experiment in the creation of a certain mood. Right from the start I knew we wanted a really dark and sombre atmosphere, the complete opposite of traditional PC war games, and I knew this atmosphere would be created almost entirely by the audio. It was a short project – 12 months from start to release – but we spent a ton of that time getting the audio balance just right... The woman crying in the distance – we made several iterations of that sound and it’s played very low in the mix, but for me it totally nails the atmosphere of the game.”



creaky floorboards were boosted up far beyond a realistic level, giving the player the aural nudge he needed to realise that his creeping was no longer going to go undetected. Likewise the 'barks' of the guards on a level had to be unambiguous: it was essential that a *Thief* player know if suspicions had been aroused, or if he had been spotted.

However, there's another far more perplexing factor in designing game audio, and that's the *art* of it. It might well be 99 per cent tech knowhow and perspiration, but the one per cent of artistic inspiration is often what makes a game's soundtrack a success. Just being readable is seldom enough. One person who knows this better than most is veteran sound designer and musician **George Sanger**, who has been working on videogame soundtracks since 1983's Intellivision game *Thin Ice*. "There's a myth going around that the job of audio is to support the rest of the game," he says. "The thing they're getting wrong is that this is not its *only* job: you still have to blow someone's brains out with joy. It takes quite a person to push that through the bureaucracy."

O'Donnell exemplifies the point: "It's a slow methodical process with occasional bursts of insight and creativity. For me there is a lot of time spent with artists, designers and programmers. Eventually, after working on many presentations, trailers and early playable versions, a palette of sounds and music emerges." Unlike visual design, which can be appraised at a glance, audio often needs to operate in conjunction with visuals to be understood. O'Donnell recalls that he had to develop his music concepts privately before they could be judged in the context of the game: "If I had told the guys in 1999 I wanted to use Gregorian-style plainchant to introduce *Halo*, that music might never have seen the light of day. Instead I had the opportunity to respond musically to the moment and the drama of what Bungie had created and it just felt right." O'Donnell, like Sanger, knew that sound design had to take risks and to pursue fresh ideas to reach its potential.

RUMBLE PACK

Crytek's Christian Schilling talks about the blending of effects: "If you experience an explosion in real life, there's more than just sound and visuals. First of all it's much louder than in a game, and there's also air pressure which you directly feel on your body. Gunshots are similar. So the challenge is to transmit those additional feelings over sound with certain effects like dynamic processing, layering of different sounds, just to mention some. In addition, the radius of loud sounds has to be balanced carefully and has to be divided into several distance aspects. Most of our guns and explosions have three distance versions for close, medium and far which blend smoothly depending on the distance."

He had to push through his idea so *Halo* didn't end up with another faux-metal soundtrack.

Of course, it's not about pursuing personal agendas either: sound designers have to meld their artistic inspirations into what the game's visual designers are trying to do, and when both aspects work in unison it completes even the smallest nuances of design, as Introversion Software's **Chris Delay** explains: "With *Darwinia* we noticed that animations actually looked better when they had good sound effects – the audio was enough to 'sell' the animation and convince the brain it was good. Visual effects that didn't have sound to go with them often felt flat and lifeless." Good sound design, it seems, is inseparable from good game design.

When games started, their audio was little more than brief sequences of beeps, and now sound designers deliver orchestral epics. Sanger recalls his early work: "At the beginning of my career I wrote the music out on a piece of paper. I was lucky enough to have a musically literate programmer who was able to, and I'll be the first to say this for you, turn it from musical notation into beeps and boops. Ha! The worst thing you could say about sound design is 'it's not just beeps and boops any more', at least in the eyes of a sound designer."

The truth is that game audio wasn't beeps and boops for very long at all, as it rapidly started to use the Musical Instrument Digital

"IT'S A MYTH THAT THE JOB OF AUDIO IS TO SUPPORT THE REST OF THE GAME. THIS IS NOT ITS ONLY JOB: YOU STILL HAVE TO BLOW SOMEONE'S BRAINS OUT WITH JOY"

Interface, or MIDI, to allow designers to compose music for games directly, as Sanger did in his pioneering work: "I started using MIDI and people would and say: 'You don't know the first thing about writing music for games', after I'd been doing it for almost ten years. Of course a little later on I was in the right place at the right time to start using the first MT-32 [Roland's MIDI synthesiser] on some early games like *Loom* and *Wing Commander*." Both games were released in 1990, and noted for their pioneering attitude towards sound and music. Sanger continues: "When people did orchestral or classical music, they were just typing in from the paper, because

they could. I think I was the first person – well, I'd like someone to prove me wrong on this one – to use the dynamics and tempo from a good performance in game, in [the case of *Loom*] a version of Swan Lake."

While MIDI and sampling allowed high-quality effects and musicianship, game audio has another dimension designers had to take into account – the activities of the player and interactivity. The key tool in making audio interactive has been 3D audio rendering. This is the spatial audio we now routinely encounter in 3D games, the array of effects that allow helicopters to buzz overhead, or ambient sounds



to be tied to particular areas. Sanger explains a little of how this works, and how it limits what sound designers are able to do: "Interactive audio ties sounds to objects. A missile can come buzzing at you, or a looping waterfall sound is tied to a waterfall. At the simplest level it allows you to play music in one location and another location, set the volume for each and determine if they're going to cross-fade. I can't do that myself. It's not the programmer's fault, but when the tool doesn't exist it's hard. At the very least there needs to be support for a text file that a sound designer can edit to load into the game and that the sound engine can see to know what to play, how loud, and how often. The sound designer can then load up the game and instantly change how loud the birds are singing." The lack of such tools is the biggest single stumbling block for sound designers today.

That's not say that there aren't already some tools that help designers out in creating interesting environmental audio, as **Peter Harrison**, Creative Labs' European digital media and relations manager, explains. "When we released the EAX 2 functionality we made a big leap," he says, talking about the 3D audio standards that came along with the early SoundBlaster Live PC sound cards. "The idea of design tools was to showcase this technology by developing for it, but if the technology is going to be successful then you want your ideas to be adopted into the developers' own tool chain and asset management. Developers do things their own way, and we're not trying to boss people around or make money from design tools. A successful tool made by us will make itself redundant." And this one did.

Creative authored a tool called Eagle in 2001, which allowed users to import a map, design geometry and then add sound simply by placing boxes round areas and rooms – the zones for environmental audio. All the audio effects and filters (such as a noise being in the next room, or acoustically altered by being in a corridor or wide-open space) were placed at the fingertips of level designers. "These could have reverb settings attached, occlusion settings attached, and all the source positions for rendering the listener's position," says Harrison. "The success of Eagle was huge, but that success made it redundant, because now, having been inspired by what we did with Eagle, most developers have integrated this kind of tool into their editors and engines. An Unreal licensee or consumer using UnrealEd will have that kind of functionality in there and be able to use it right away." Getting new effects to the designers is, Harrison thinks, the true frontier of where sound design has to go in the future.



Game audio remains

an enticing frontier for Sanger, too. He now runs an interactive audio think-tank called Project Bar-B-Q, which is attended by sound designers as well as the software and hardware fraternity. "There's a lack of consciousness and there's a lack of tools," he says. "This is because there's no equivalent of General MIDI for interactive audio." Sanger hopes that new tools will unlock the potential for game audio. "That would take out the whole, primitive low end of audio," he says. It would, in short, start to provide more of the kinds of tools that visual artists have had access to for quite some time.

If there's one thing that's clear from a survey of current-gen game development it's that while we're currently bathing in the glow of superb visuals, audio hasn't benefited in quite the same way. Small advancements are being made all the time – such as the HRTF systems that mimic surround-sound effects on headphones – but there are still some big steps to come.

WE'RE CURRENTLY BATHING IN THE GLOW OF SUPERB VISUALS, BUT AUDIO HASN'T BENEFITED IN QUITE THE SAME WAY. THERE ARE SOME BIG STEPS TO COME

Harrison is keen to point out that companies like Creative are leading the charge into the next generation of audio, and that once their innovations are widely adopted they'll have ramifications for the game audio we experience on a day-to-day basis. "There are a number of realtime effects that are becoming particularly important," he says. "If we look at all the reverb and filtering effects they're what we call 'time domain effects'. To explain this: if you look at a wave editor you see a 2D graph, with time and volume, and the time domain effects effect changes in these two dimensions.

But then there's a third dimension to sound, rather than space, which is frequency, and we can have our

sound data in three dimensions, which is the amount of sound energy in different frequencies. Once you have sound data in this domain there's a lot more you can do with it." Harrison cites Rockfeller Skank by Fatboy Slim as an example of these kinds of effects in action. "That bit where vocals are stretched out? That's it."

Frequency domain processing will give sound designers far greater flexibility and control over the processes that they can drop into audio in realtime: "Once you have sound mapped to time, volume and frequencies many more effects and processes become available, especially with stretching and distorting sounds. You can analyse dialogue samples and change the way people's voices sound, and so on. This is starting to be used in games already." When companies like Creative fully get to grips with frequency domain processing in game audio we'll see some big changes in what sound designers can do.

But perhaps the most vital part of any next-generation audio will be aesthetic sensibility and artistic innovation. "I think creative use of silence can be important," says Harrison. "If you

look at *Ico* on the PS2 there's a lot of space in the soundtrack and a lot of quiet, ambient sounds. There was often not a great deal going on, and as a gamer I really appreciated that experience. I think there should be a little more consideration for these kinds of approaches in game soundtracks."

Harrison is not the only one who sees scope for greater creativity in game audio. "No one has conquered game audio," says Sanger. "The greatest of them all, for a while there, was Michael Land. He created the music for *The Dig*, which is on a record label for a reason: it's good. But it's a linear piece that got a record deal with Angel or whatever... Afterwards he came to me with his big beard and he said: 'I don't think interactive audio will ever really be possible, it'll

never be great art'. This is one of the greats saying this... and this is because one of the most important aspects of music is timing. You need to know what's going to happen and when. Composing interactive music for games is like, well, rather than making a painting, you're mailing colours and a list of directions to some kid who wants to look at the painting and getting him to put it together. That's the massive, impossible goal. And the remarkable thing? We're getting close. Every week I hear about some idea, or some young guy comes along with a new angle. It's tantalising. I think there's going to be an explosion of interactive audio art, and it's going to happen because of games."

Returning to game design lecturer Betts in his Huddersfield studio we begin to find that there are a number of reasons to think that game audio's evolution still has much to do. "The problem with game audio, particularly music, is often how quickly it can adapt," Betts explains. "Say in *Tomb Raider*, audio might be triggered by location, so I can step into a giant vista and soaring symphonics start up. Then I turn right around and hide in the murky brick tunnel I came from... the audio doesn't react fast enough, so I get a symphonic brick tunnel." There is a solution to this kind of adaptive audio, says Betts, and it might well hold the key to the future of both art and technology. "Generative audio can potentially produce tracks down to a more granular level. So, for example, the drum track of a piece playing could have extra hits added while you are in combat as you actually hit, like in *Rez*. It could also change other elements of the audio by altering parameters on the fly. This only works if the audio is being semi-composed in realtime... Of course, it's hard to do, and really processor intensive, so people don't do it." It seems that the solutions to creating a new path in game audio are already there, but it's a hard road to take.

Sanger offers a similar diagnosis: "Game audio is getting one little aspect improved here, one little aspect there, but there is no example of the thing that's as different as *Katamari*, as fun as *Guitar Hero*, as interactive as *Monkey Island*, and still uses its instrumentation in a way that is thoroughly musical. We run from this, and I don't like it. We start talking about business, about how it's possible to do a 40-piece orchestra." The only solution, Sanger suggests, is for a Miyamoto of game audio to step up and shake the entire industry's foundations. Only by fighting the corner for sound design, and moving the bureaucratic mountains that get in the way, is anything going to get done. "It is rough, and the stories [about sound design troubles] are daunting," says Sanger. "But those stories, those experiences, are the only thing that will take a newbie and turn him into a badass legend."

PITCH SHIFTING

Harrison laments the difficulty of getting audio across to gamers: "The problem for us is that if gamers are buying a new graphics card they can see stills in a magazine and read the stats that explain how many frames per second they're going to get, and they can understand the increase in detail and resolution immediately. For audio you really have to do that, and you can't do it with a magazine page. However, I don't think you have to have trained ears to hear the difference between hardware and software audio. The quality of the audio, the 3D audio processing, it's stuff that you don't have to listen to game audio all the time to pick up on."



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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Burnout Paradise



Smashing through a billboard, an instinctive dodge through a shortcut, before driving straight into the vanishing point. Pity about that broadside into the bus...
360, PS3, EA

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune



An adventure through Drake's dazzling tropic island does more than entertain: its masterclass in characterisation shows how games can rival the biggest blockbusters.
360, SCE

Rez HD



We've carefully arranged spare pads around our bodies, but such full sensory foolery hasn't added as much to the experience as the new sharp lines – and online highscores.
360, MICROSOFT

Change for change's sake

Do sequels always deliver what fans want?



Dante doing his thing in the very first *Devil May Cry*, which you might forgive people for confusing, at a distance, with the latest incarnation – is that a good or a bad thing?

Change is good, goes the mantra. To stay still is to stagnate. But games have a problematical relationship with change. Six of the UK's top-ten-selling videogames in 2007 were sequels. Of the other four, *The Simpsons Game* had a bankable licence, *Wii Play* is bundled with a Wii Remote, and *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training* continues to baffle predictions. *Assassin's Creed*, the only genuinely new IP, scraped into ninth position.

Of course, *Assassin's Creed* was designed to spawn a sequel, and in itself that's no bad thing. Where a sequel becomes problematic is the extent to which it builds on its predecessors when fans love the original so much. More often than not, expectation amounts to that treacherous phrase 'more of the same, but better'.

It's worth considering what a few recent sequels have offered beyond the obvious level of a narrative continuation. *Devil May Cry 4* was a pleasure because we were applying some hard-earned and (let's be honest) ridiculously flashy moves that have been hardwired into our fingers since the first game's debut, and also (and let's be honest again) because

we were rediscovering Dante in HD. We were happy fans. It's not only the pads used for *Super Smash Bros Brawl* that are the same: its core is unchanged, too. *Apollo Justice* is almost identical to its *Phoenix Wright* predecessors. *God Of War* on PSP is a conglomeration of its bigger brothers squeezed on to the small screen. We are happy, happy, happy fans.

But are these true sequels, or are they simply boxed episodic content, lengthening out the first thrill and establishing it as a de facto standard? For at least one **Edge** friend, *Phoenix Wright* is a soap opera they can't miss the latest instalment of, wrapped in a game they've long since become bored by.

And what of *Condemned 2*? Here's a game that seems to have been intended as fan service but has arguably misjudged its market. Will those who enjoyed *Condemned*'s urban take on survival horror be similarly enthusiastic for a sequel that's more about violence than shocks? If the idea that change is good is a cliché, *Condemned 2* shows there's another to be borne in mind: be careful what you wish for – you might just get it.



84 **Super Smash Bros Brawl**
84



86 **Lost Odyssey**
360

88 **Condemned 2: Bloodshot**
360, PS3

90 **Rainbow Six Vegas 2**
360, PC, PS3

91 **Army Of Two**
360, PS3

92 **God Of War: Chains Of Olympus**
PSP

93 **Lost: The Videogame**
360, PC, PS3

94 **Sins Of A Solar Empire**
PC

95 **Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney**
DS



95 **Professor Layton And The Curious Village**
DS

96 **Penumbra: Black Plague**
PC

96 **Dark Mist**
PSP



97 **Sega Superstars Tennis**
360, PS3, Wii

97 **Space Invaders Extreme**
DS, PSP

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



SUPER SMASH BROS BRAWL

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SORA LTD, GAME ARTS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E183



One of *Brawl*'s new touches is that characters can paddle in water for a short while – although restricted movement makes them vulnerable

If there's one thing *Super Smash Bros Brawl* has going for it, it's that it's got lots of things. Loads of them.

It's the obsessive-compulsive of the fighting genre, on the outskirts of the specialist market with a big smile and a bulging rucksack. *Brawl* aims to be nothing less than the most complete instalment of *Super Smash Bros*, a fighting game of huge depth, and in addition provide a surfeit of sickly sweet treats for the videogame brand fans. Further dancing around the issue does it a disservice: it achieves this, and then some. *Super Smash Bros Brawl* has the kitchen sink, all right, but it's pretty much got the rest of the house hidden in there as well.

Generosity isn't a word often associated with videogames or, indeed, Nintendo. *Brawl* dares you not to use it. It's creaking under the weight of its content, rammed to bursting with modes, options, trophies, stickers, music, levels, and demos. It's hard to know where to start – even existing modes are significantly improved with considered changes: event mode, for example, now has separate difficulty levels and can be attempted in co-op.

The singleplayer campaign is the greatest beneficiary in terms of quantity: the old mode of a simple battle through stages followed by a fight against a giant hand still



The level designer in *Brawl* begins with relatively basic tools, but as with every other element of the game more options are unlocked as you play – ultimately, any reasonable variants on the basic fighting environment are possible, the only notable problems being a relative lack of backgrounds and the dearth of dynamic effects



Green Hill Zone is a fine setting for a classic battle, and even comes with the original music. While you're fighting, Knuckles, Tails and Silver run around the loop in the background – a handful of many cameos that fill the stages

exists, but it's now joined by a lengthy side-scrolling quest mode that can be played in co-op. It's best to get this out of the way first, because it's the only weak element of *Brawl*'s offering – knockabout nonsense à la *Donkey Kong Country* at best, basic and repetitive at worst. Near the end there's some significant recycling of environments along with the big boss fights, and it occasionally becomes onerous, but to define it as more than a shallow element of the overall game's greatness would be deliberately obtuse.

That greatness is multiplayer. *Super Smash Bros* is a series that has often been unfairly derided as button-mashing, largely thanks to its surface sheen of cutesy characters, but it has one of the most enduringly innovative and deep systems of any fighter, built around controlling key locations in the levels and anticipating the movement of opponents. The fighters either fit into distinct groups or are unique: Olimar would be an example of the latter, the former would be the likes of Link, Pit and

The series has often been unfairly derided as button-mashing, but it has one of the most innovative and deep systems of any fighter



Marth – all sword characters with some broadly similar styles where the distinctions in individual moves make a huge difference. Of course there are higher-tier characters and some that seem a little weedy, but none of them quite has the butterfly/bee combination perfect, and holes can be picked in every defence.

Learning how to keep an opponent down in combination with the intricacies of each stage is worth the considerable investment, and *Brawl*'s stages stand comparison with the series' best: the new Pokémon stage seems simplistic but can be jarringly confusing with the involvement of the background characters flipping the level and destroying sections of the ground; similarly, Shadow Moses gets progressively wrecked as the fight continues, until a full-scale Metal



Brawl offers support for four different controller options, but by far the best approach is to opt for the old GameCube pad. Is this the first game where the ideal, and developer-supported, input is a previous-generation controller?

Gear bursts through the scenery and screams. Pictochat constantly alters the terrain, the Wind Waker level replaces Rainbow Road, Mario Sunshine cycles through the basic *Smash* variants with an Isle Delfino background, and shyguy racers on the Mario Kart stage can sweep you off the screen in an instant. If there's a criticism, it's that many of the new stages have elements that affect the layout – and some that attack characters directly. These have to be learned and incorporated into strategies, and it can seem a little like a chore when you get caught in a lava flow on the new *Metroid Prime* level for the third time – but, equally, it's beautiful when you escape it and knock all of your fellow combatants in.

As for those characters, almost all of *Melee*'s roster return for action with some significant additions. Captain Olimar is particularly unusual, depending on Pikmin as his offensive and defensive limbs, but is very capable after the intricacies are worked out. Sonic is realised magnificently: speedy, powerful, full of cheek, altogether the most definitive vision of the character



Pokémon are less effective now, although this is compensated for by the excellent Assist pickups, which contain characters like Lakitu and Excite Bike racers

in years; how strange that it's taken Nintendo to remind us why we liked him in the first place. Snake's movements and attacks are instantly recognisable, and his fighting style retains that strange wavering between comedy and competence that defines the character. Pit is annoyingly deadly, Meta Knight is a buzzing thorn in your side, and King Dedede is a powerhouse who will dominate any match under competent hands. Of all the new characters the only relative disappointment is the Pokémon Trainer, whose charges have cribbed movesets and seem like more of a greatest hits novelty package than a powerful and coherent combination of abilities.

Beyond this core of the game, *Brawl* begins to open up as it's played. More characters, more levels, more items, more demos, more trophies, more powers, more stickers, more soundtracks. Unlocking the various prizes is constant, both because there are simply so many trinkets up for grabs, and because the philosophy of the game is to constantly reward the player, whether with a few coins, a statue of an obscure Nintendo

character or the chance to fight against a new challenger. Combined with the 'unlock' screen, which offers little hints as to conditions that have to be fulfilled for other prizes, *Brawl* lures out the completionist lurking in the heart of every gamer.

Super Smash Bros Brawl is the most complete realisation of its core idea you could imagine possible, and far more than a spruced-up *Melee*. Because of this, there's something a little funereal about it: it is so comprehensive that there's nowhere for this series to go without radical change, and any further entries on a similar model will simply be iterative. But why think of the future? *Brawl* is all about Masahiro Sakurai and his team putting a full stop on *Super Smash Bros* as they have developed it and we have known it. And what a way to go.

[9]

Among the many new levels, one or two of which are remakes of old *Smash* favourites, there are eight *Melee* levels that are gradually unlocked – including the brilliant Hyrule Castle and variable Pokémon Stadium



At first, it appears that there are some *Smash* moves which are wildly overpowered in comparison to others. But after practice it's entirely possible to kill all three of your opponents with most of them – some just need more clever positioning than others

If you know your history...



Brawl acts as a new medium for a very small niche of videogame history – if a recent convert wanted to know about the gaming history of Nintendo then, outside of playing through the original games themselves, there is no better introduction to the 30-odd years of characters and games that have defined the company's creative output. Easter eggs abound, demos focus on key aspects of each character's series, there are descriptions of the major characters available, and even things to surprise hardened researchers of the subject – a statue of an obscure mid-boss here, a snatch of an old, forgotten song there. It's a magnificent virtual scrapbook, and repays with interest the time you devote to it.



LOST ODYSSEY

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: MISTWALKER PREVIOUSLY IN: E170, E182



Your team members are divided into immortals and mortals. The former, if killed in battle, will automatically return to life after three more turns. This neat service of consistency will be the saviour of many a super-close-fought encounter

Lost Odyssey contains some of the most tender writing ever committed to a videogame. Kaim, the game's protagonist, is cursed with immortality. Cursed because, for all of life's joys and triumphs, there is inevitable and equal sadness and loss. It is these burdens – wives and children departed, homes razed by natural disaster, the unforgettable death masks of 10,000 enemy soldiers – which, when multiplied over eternity, become a weight too heavy for any man to bear.

Despite Kaim's amnesia, that scourge of so many an RPG hero, these far-flung memories break into his consciousness by way of dreams, triggered by people, places or events encountered through the game. Each of the 31 dreams is presented by text that reveals as you read it, soundtracked by music boxes and melancholy tinkling pianos, touching and sparse vignettes of narrative that examine the human condition with keen eloquence. Penned by Japanese novelist Kiyoshi Shigematsu and translated by Jay Rubin, a Harvard professor best known for his translations of Haruki Murakami's novels, each brims with sentiment but remains shy of sentimentality. These segments of the

The game's flow is predictable: explore a corridor environment while fighting random battles, face off against a boss



Time-poor players will be irritated to hear that the game's save points are few and far between. Unless RPGs adapt to the increasing age of gamers, the genre might become the preserve of time-rich youngsters



Load times are a constant interruption throughout the game. There is none of the seamless area loading exhibited in recent PS2 RPG *Rogue Galaxy*, but the biggest culprits are the pre-battle interludes – the camera sweeps and pans around the scene for up to 20 seconds before the characters appear

game are special, beautiful even, but they are shining jewels set in a surround of more contentious material.

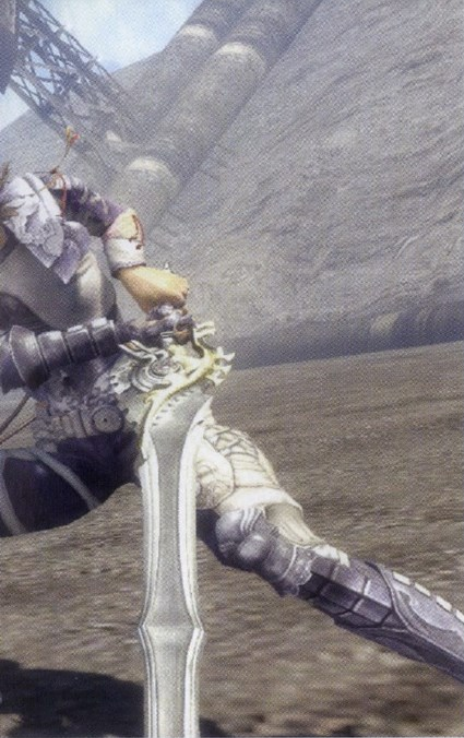
This, the second Xbox 360 RPG from Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker, is almost as traditional as the first. The genre's most recent journeys into innovation are all forgotten here in favour of a framework reminiscent of the nine-year-old *Final Fantasy VIII*. The game's flow is predictable and orthodox: explore a corridor environment while fighting random battles, face off against a boss, and finally trigger the next narrative interlude. Save for the fact that the protagonist is past his petulant teenage years (although making him 1,000 years old was perhaps overkill in answering complaints) the game conforms to all the genre's strengths and weaknesses, yet more evidence that it's Sakaguchi's departure from Square Enix that has freed the rival company to explore the interactive story's modern potential.

Lost Odyssey, then, perhaps more than any other 360 game yet, typifies its stereotyped genre and as such it's easy to make an accurate snap judgment as to how much you will enjoy the game. For, while it's resolutely conformist, it is also a resounding success within those tight constraints.



Principal among the game's achievements is the storyline, which, even outside of Shigematsu's exemplary work, is compelling, only occasionally slipping into the sentimentality the dream interludes so deftly avoid. Told via long and frequent cutscenes, the narrative is well-directed, utilising frame-in-frame film techniques and enhanced by Nobuo Uematsu's thoughtful score. Similarly, the motion-captured and Japanese-voiced characters bring humour and believability to every scene. Thanks largely to the flashbacks, Kaim emerges as a deep and interesting lead character, lending additional weight and sincerity to some of the game's standout moments, which include what is surely the most affecting death yet seen in an RPG.

Lost Odyssey displays considerable visual flair, too. A sprawling and awesome battlefield cutscene slips smoothly into an



For all the game's high production values, there are some curious and noticeable shortcomings. Was there really no time to make stair-climbing or door-opening animations?



Final Fantasy's 'press A on everything' mechanic is used, its tedium exacerbated by ponderous item-check animations. Occasionally, a dustbin or pot will reveal a creature called Pipit; feed it enough goodies and it'll upgrade your items



All your skill-base



While the mortal members of your squad learn new skills to use in battle progressively as they level up, immortals need to learn new skills from their mortal teammates. Players simply select a mortal's skill they want their immortal character to learn and, after the requisite number of battles has been fought, the new ability is grasped. In this way it's possible to quickly diversify a squad, teaching tanks healing magic, for example, or granting a magic user the ability to attack an enemy twice in one round.

interactive fight in the game's early stages; Kaim leans into the heavy rain as you traverse a mountain top; a flock of crows disperse into the menacing sky as you cross the threshold of an aged haunted mansion. These memorable visual moments modernise the musty internal mechanics in such a way as to make them more palatable, even if the Unreal Engine 3 tech sitting beneath sometimes shudders under the burden.

However, so much attention has been lavished on the story and its presentation that, when interactivity rears its head, it's done almost begrudgingly. Occasionally a tedious minigame is crowbarred into the middle of a serious story scene as some desperate means to involve the viewer as a player. Often it's ineffective, breaking the spell created by the filmic direction and reminding you that you're in an antiquated videogame after all, with all the clicking on

dustbins to find coins, banal and incessant NPC conversations and unimaginative find and fetch side-quests of old.

The turn-based battle system, however, offers enough idiosyncrasies and ideas to maintain interest over the game's four discs. The formation of your team (created from up to five of the story characters) is of special importance, those members positioned in the front row acting as a shield (complete with its own separate HP) to protect those in the rear. Additionally, a complex skill system in which team members can study and acquire each other's moves adds much-needed

flexibility. The ring system, which adds rhythm-action timing to increase the effectiveness of physical hits, works well, and enemy design demands the use of the full range of attacks and techniques as well as attentive strategising to overcome.

Despite its length, *Lost Odyssey* is essentially a celebration of finite things. Its lasting message, a message punched home at every opportunity, is a warning to those who wish for immortality. Everything has its day, says the game, and nothing should last forever. An apt lesson, perhaps, for the game itself.

[7]



CONDEMNED 2: BLOODSHOT

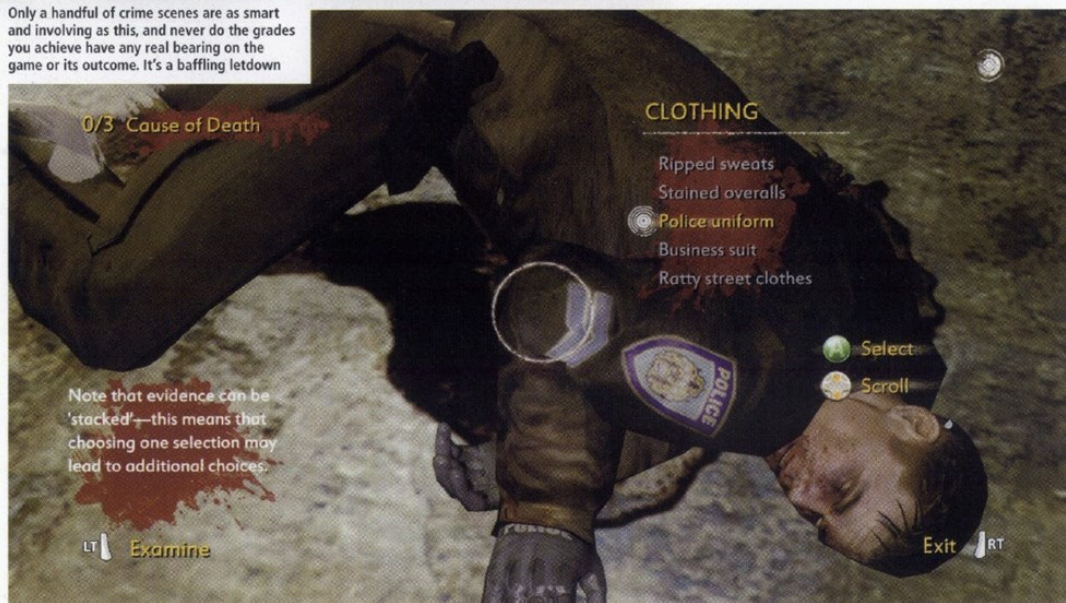
FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PREVIOUSLY IN: E180, E183



We really should stop meeting like this. Previous denizens of *Condemned*'s ruined department store, these haunting mannequins appear briefly in the sequel, for no apparent reason. Again, their prosthetic arms can be used as clubs



Only a handful of crime scenes are as smart and involving as this, and never do the grades you achieve have any real bearing on the game or its outcome. It's a baffling letdown



0/3 Cause of Death

CLOTHING

Ripped sweats
Stained overalls
Police uniform
Business suit
Ratty street clothes

Select

Scroll

Exit

Note that evidence can be 'stacked'—this means that choosing one selection may lead to additional choices

LT Examine

Say what you like about *Condemned*, with its relentless nihilism and occasional silliness, but at least it had a trajectory. Granted, that trajectory was straight down, from the gutter to some place infinitely worse, but it was a calculated descent. The scares were orchestrated, the characters were real, and the violence was feral, lingering in the hands when it was all over. The weapons were blunt but, as an instrument of survival horror, the game itself was not. Its sequel, however, is.

Condemned 2: Bloodshot has plenty of problems, many involving hero Ethan Thomas. The first game's troubled detective, ruined by his hunt for psychopath Serial Killer X, is now a tramp, waking drunk in an alleyway. You discover soon enough that he's a lost cause—a delirious, boorish and emotionally bankrupt thug. He has nothing

A doll factory is prowled by suicide-bombing toys. A cargo ship hosts golems and gimps. A theatre becomes a circus of corseted zombies in top hats

in common with his former self. He has nowhere to go and little to say. A perfect symbol, it transpires, for the game itself.

Physically, he's unrecognisable, less a pedestrian cop than a frightful concoction of Sam Fisher and Yoda, with bandaged hands and a vomit-stained T-shirt. Even when he's reunited with his colleagues and sent after a recovered SKX, he never acts like a man with hope, an agenda or an ounce of passion.

Likewise, the game seems almost ashamed of its past merits, happy to wallow in senseless filth. Gone is the taut direction, the visceral combat and the creeping menace. Here, instead, is a more traditionally violent videogame, juvenile and absurd.

In uncovering a new conspiracy, which among other things involves sonic transmitters that drive people mad, Thomas pummels his way through a series of disjointed, zany nightmares. There's a bowling alley which leads, through a backroom door, straight into a derelict primary school. A doll factory is prowled by suicide-bombing toys. A cargo ship hosts scrapyard golems and psychic gimps. A theatre becomes a circus of corseted zombies in top hats. And a log cabin fire is derailed by a rampaging grizzly bear. These levels barely make sense within themselves, let alone within the scatterbrained plot.

Combat, once a tight system of street survival skills, now creaks beneath a glut of fancy moves. As well as one-two punches and crunching defensive kicks, you've now



4.0x
One-Two Combo!



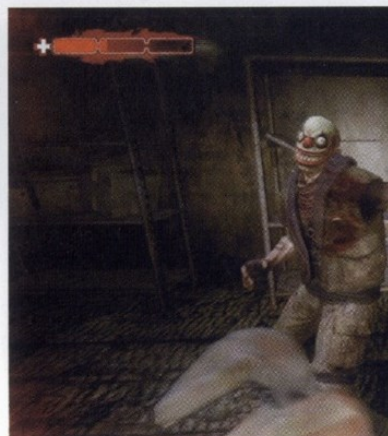
With a face either masked or made out of scar tissue, this guy is a manifestation of your inner demons. He's barely explored, however, so for the most part he's just the Alcohol Demon. A shame: we were hoping for a Latent Balloon Fetish Demon



got hooks and combos and QTE attacks. Do you snap their arm or whack them in the balls? If they drop to their knees, do you feed them to a furnace or put their head through a TV set? Merely choosing between these options feels vulgar and detrimental. Armed combat fares better, adding plenty of improvised bludgeons such as bowling pins and toilet seats – but when entire levels are included merely to contextualise such weapons, the game's priorities come into question. Is this *Seven* or is it *Fight Club*? Crime or merely punishment?

Come the final calamitous act, the game stretches itself to breaking point. A newfound fondness for FPS gunplay comes immediately unstuck, the limited ammo proving a bitch to replace. Maybe it's a fault in the review code, but simply picking things up can be a genuine nightmare, especially at speed. If you're not placed perfectly atop the ammo, the prompt won't appear – and then you're dead. If a cabinet contains more than one object, chances are you'll grab the wrong one. The ability to holster smaller weapons is a nice, sensible touch, but this isn't the gun game it thinks it is. The last time we checked, *Condemned* was about single bullets doing horrifying damage, not soldiers and automatics.

What hauls the game into average shape are the times when, in a break from



character, it remembers what it should be doing. At best, its revised forensic puzzles have you checking bodies for signs of trauma, identity and prior movements. Out of blood patterns and signs of disturbance must come the story of a crime, requiring you to think beyond the game to an outside knowledge of popular fiction. In these moments, especially, it displays its true potential. Then the moment's gone, and it's back to the cycle of blind self-sabotage. For each rewarding task, so many more are perfunctory, like photographing a wall or simply picking something up.

At a glance, the game's perfectly tuned motion blur, painstakingly decorated sets and moody lighting suggest none of this. Technically, the whole thing benefits from Monolith's long fascination with urban squalor, though rarely to the point of topping the original. And that's the real sticking point: that this game's occasional best is what *Condemned* did all the time. It toyed



Hands up who thought the ABC Warriors would appear in the game's final act, and that you'd take them down with a sonic crossbow and giant magnet. At this point, you can already make enemy heads explode by shouting at them



Stopping everything for PDA plot updates is as irritating as ever, though at least you're no longer teased with just a tiny degree of movement. For such a stop-start affair, this bleak investigation seldom withstands the scrutiny

with the senses, its enemies appearing first as thudding footsteps, then as shadows, and finally as furious onslaughts of flesh and bone. Now, it's too fantastical, its violence occurring anywhere and everywhere to ever-decreasing effect.

Bloodshot is a nasty, demented piece of work in more ways than even it would prefer. But it is competent on a basic, mechanical level, and as such will find its fans. For them, the addition of online fighting, with options including weapon rules and environment selection, might feel like something other than a final nail in its coffin.

[5]



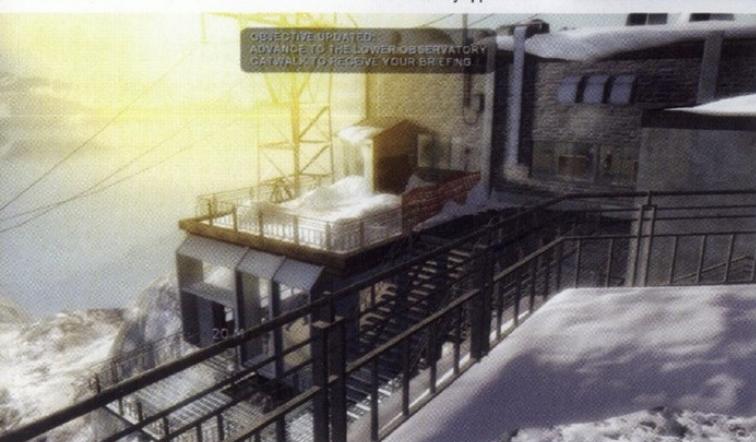
The petal menu encourages you to seek out evidence everywhere, this game not quite as compartmentalised as before. The GPS tracker lets you set waypoints and eases navigation

Stop, look, bludgeon



With a story that makes almost no sense, *Bloodshot* resorts to grabbing your attention any way it can. Much of Thomas' in-game dialogue is triggered by hitting a 'response' button, producing an off-hand remark or merely prompting further dialogue. Worse are the scored interrogations which end up asking you the questions, grading your knowledge of the story thus far. Everything in the game is evaluated in some way, though more for the sake of it than to provide useful feedback or otherwise promote repeat play. Other distractions include the sonic transmitters, for some reason detectable with your gas spectrometer, which you can smash for bonus artwork.

Introducing a new squad leader sees the tutorial stage set in the Pyrenees, five years previously. Near the end of the game, you'll be a playing without any backup – the change in pacing is overdue, but not wholly appreciated



Tour de special force



Doubtless a concession to the epic cumulative online playtime invested in the first *Vegas* title, the sequel's levelling aspect is a truly RPG-style trek. Spanning several dozen promotions – with the final rank requiring 400,000 exp points – these unlock various weapons and kit items that can be chosen at the outset of solo missions and multiplayer battles. Exp bonuses are scaled in accordance to difficulty, too. Some of the prominent high-level unlockables – riot shields, for example – can nonetheless be found in the singleplayer campaign irrespective of exp. Having the levelling straddle all play modes is a welcome touch, but letting it govern unlocks in a similarly universal manner is less so; players aiming to play completely alone may feel somewhat locked out, given the time they'll have to devote.

After the jackpot-flush environments of the original *Rainbow Six Vegas*, the sequel opts for a tone that's more *SimCity* than *Sin City*. The squad-based fundamentals of Ubi's Clancy shooter remain unchanged – a team of three, led with unfussy but precise commands – but this is a game that saunters through Vegas' backrooms rather than basking in its grandiose limelight. It's dangerous territory, and not just because of the upgraded terrorist forces that lay in wait. It hopes that players appreciate the scale and intelligibility of its mostly daytime sorties – into courtyards, foyers, a junkyard, monorail station and even a booth-ridden videogame convention – that feels monotone and muted next to the cabaret chintz of the original.

Cosmetic critics will have plenty to swipe at. Aside from its understated environments,



A thermal scan is periodically available, providing a temporary mini-map lockdown of the vicinity, clearly revealing the positions of any terrorists lurking nearby



The main campaign can still be played in co-op – online or splitscreen – but the player count has been dropped from four to two, compensated for by two AI teammates, both of whom are commanded exclusively by one player

there's other subsidence: an occasionally groggy framerate, belated texture filling on a stage's load-up, and some basic, boxy backdrop props. It's countered by some high-quality character modelling, but, aside from the occasional screen-filling explosion, the absence of set-pieces rams home the fact that this is back-to-basics warfare. Those basics have advanced, however, a benefit that's felt by those playing if not by those watching. Your team operates more tightly and reliably, terrorist intelligence feels a little sharper, and it's not rare to be unwittingly broadsided. Shield-carrying enemies now force you to work harder for kills. Weapons feel effective and accurate, and the stretches of open expanse that appear in missions make the core skulk-and-snipe gunplay feel more tense and flexible. And the cover system remains one of the most dependable and wieldy around; unbearably, such a plaudit is still a rarity in gaming.

Stages would have benefited from retaining their breadth but reeling in the length. The metronomic pace and enormous enemy count can cause the solidity to dull, given the absence of anything bombastic. An ever-present RPG aspect works a sprinkle of compulsive magic (see 'Tour de special force') that straddles every mode, adding to your experience and losing nothing if death sends you back to a checkpoint.



Experience bonuses and unlockables come from kills in three categories: close-quarter combat, marksman and assault (kills through cover, or with explosives)

Multiplayer is, once again, where *Rainbow Six* takes flight; everything can be played co-operatively, either splitscreen or online, and the uncomplicated, cut-and-dried nature of Terrorist Hunt mode allows it to remain one of the most spontaneous slices of team-up gameplay around. *Vegas 2* won't alter any perceptions of the series. It's the curse and blessing of being a second helping of a heavily consumed game. The dowdy settings will leave some feeling undernourished, but the improvement in robustness offers extra meat to chew on, and the title's inevitable popularity will allow the online possibilities to develop to their fullest potential.

With *Denied Ops* dropping the *Conflict* ball and *Call Of Duty 4*'s snappy splendour drowning any tactical sense, it's a likeable and distracting continuation, but one that won't be difficult to usurp. [7]



ARMY OF TWO

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA MONTREAL) PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E180

Anyone who's seen Team America: World Police will be familiar with the delicate refrain "America – fuck yeah!" Those three words pretty much contain the essence of *Army Of Two*. Barring one mission set in Miami, this is a game based around travelling to locations such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and China and killing the local militia with a 'pimped' weapon (EA Montreal's word, not ours). Enemies come with monikers like Ali Youssef and Mohammed Al Habiib, while a typical cutscene exchange is "We'll get a beer when this war is over, you son of a bitch". Subtlety isn't high on *Army Of Two*'s agenda, then.

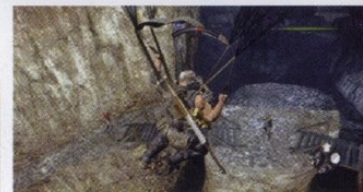
It's not particularly clever, either. *Gears Of War* showed how testosterone-drenched violence could be complemented by a knowing script. *Call Of Duty 4* showed that explosive game situations mirroring real-world warfare could be used for cutting comparisons. *Army Of Two* doesn't deserve to be placed alongside either of those titles, either in narrative or mechanics. Its attempt at engaging with private military contractors is painting a few bad guys as comedy villains and, in the context of its franchise-establishing ending, *Army Of Two*'s general attitude seems to be that PMCs are good things if you're the one running them. Perhaps we'll have to wait for *Haze* for some brains in our headshots.



Dialogue is amusing, but not in a good way. A choice cut: "Just be thankful we haven't had to fight any of our friends yet", to which the reply naturally is: "Yeah, that would suck"

Those considerations aside, *Army Of Two* is a relatively straightforward thirdperson shooter, focused on large-scale skirmishes and the dynamics of a two-man team. It's serviceable enough in some regards, and co-op is where the game is at its best, showing the true potential of the concept in chaotic firefights and the odd moment when you'll work efficiently with your partner to decimate ranks of enemies. The enemy AI isn't particularly worthy of such clever play, however, and has some problems with distinguishing between targets: foes often

The game has several cringeworthy hip hop references, with even its coup de grace delivered with a line from N.W.A. A section on the Wu-Tang Clan will fool few of its target audience and is a particularly bad 'yoo' moment



Army Of Two does have some notable incidental touches: your codpiece, for example, bears the legend 'MERC' in large letters, which must be helpful for any bad guys wondering what you are while looking at your groin

Playing with each other



The 'aggrometer' is *Army Of Two*'s most interesting proposition, relating to the amount of attention that the enemy is paying each member of your team. Represented by both a basic meter on the top of the screen and a neat visual effect that sees your character go either bright red or transparent, it's clear when you are attracting fire or less obvious to the enemy. Unfortunately, the applications of this go no further than a host of enemies that have tank-like armour on their fronts and the equivalent of a string vest on their back: you will hear the word 'flank' countless times. Co-op sniping is exactly the same, a neat idea that the game doesn't offer enough possibilities to explore. And the less said about the parachute drop nonsense the better.

There are clipping issues throughout, but there is good ragdoll fun to be had when feigning your own death. Try it on some stairs for a particularly interesting demise



attempt to flank you by running into plain sight of your partner, or vice versa. They are also annoyingly accurate when blindfiring. In fact, keeping your head out of danger via blindfiring very quickly becomes a key tool in your own arsenal, since it's accurate way beyond the level you expect (you even get to use a reticule).

When you're not playing with friends, however, the partner AI has some very bad habits: it will drag you into the middle of firefights when trying to heal, get stuck on certain sections of scenery and – worst of all – depends on you to continually direct its behaviour. The levels are full of sections that grate because they must be approached with both partners: there are a huge number of step jumps and things to be ripped open with two pairs of hands. Comically, you need both partners to open the fairly normal-looking double doors that occasionally crop up, simply so that the game can cut away to an in-engine animation of the two kicking it open. At around six hours in length, though, at least it doesn't drag on too long.

Army Of Two offers little that's new, despite the glimpses of promise its central dynamic occasionally shows, and the remainder has been done more proficiently elsewhere. There are worse no-brainer shooters out there to choose from, but there are also many, many better examples. [4]



GOD OF WAR: CHAINS OF OLYMPUS

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: MARCH 28 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: READY AT DAWN PREVIOUSLY IN: E182

Stuff of legend



Fans will pick up *Chains Of Olympus* without difficulty, the game changing nothing beyond a few historic weapons and the occasional control. Red, green and blue orbs fulfil their usual roles of currency, health and magic, the upgrade interface identical to those on PS2. As ever, explorative play leads to more valuable finds, such as Gorgon Eyes and Phoenix Feathers, which in sufficient quantities will permanently boost your stats. Newcomers, meanwhile, will appreciate the regular tutorial pop-ups for weapons and techniques, though the combination of small screen, aggressive AI and sheer physical hurt makes this an inadvisable entry point.

In making *God Of War* pocket-sized without any immediate cutbacks, *Chains Of Olympus* is a marvel worthy of the great Ray Harryhausen. Like his animated skeletons and Talos statue, it brings the impossible to life, squeezing a congruent chronicle of Kratos into something barely larger than a scientific calculator.

It's a new adventure, with new enemy types and cutscenes, cunningly built out of old and new materials. The brilliant, sweeping score is from *God Of War II*, as are elements of the puzzles and levels. But the remix is such that everything feels original, if not entirely fresh. The story, a flashback to events prior to the first game, spins neglected pieces of backstory into several hours of furious, often scintillating hack-and-slash.

Ready At Dawn, which worked similar magic with PSP's *Daxter*, has brought a winning philosophy to this Herculean task. When necessary, *Chains* is an appreciative handheld game full of countless save points and modified controls. At all other times, however, when other games might wither on the small screen, it outright refuses to do so. There are moments when Kratos is so dwarfed by his surroundings, the camera pulled so far back, that he's little more than a huddle of dancing pixels. Then, in combat, the Blades of Chaos explode into as much



God Of War's bad guys have been hacked and slashed into a host of new designs, just like the QTEs that finish them. The problems arise in later levels, when these recycled beasts are themselves recycled



As ever, Kratos deals exclusively in screen-spanning combos and devastating magic. Enemies are varied enough to bring his complete repertoire into play

light and colour as a *Wipeout Pure* or *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins*, rarely at the cost of a slick framerate.

This does hurt the game occasionally, such as when larger enemies crowd the screen and make smaller ones hard to track – but not as much as it hurts the hands. While there's absolutely nothing wrong with the control scheme, and the use of triggers for blocking and rolling working absolutely fine, the sheer fury of combat will, literally, leave an impression on you. It's a testament to PSP that the hardware withstands almost



With demon gates keeping you locked in until each fight is won, *Chains* bombards you with ever-larger waves of enemies, checkpoints provided before and after



constant battery, the analogue nub being swirled to near breaking point by the QTEs. But your skin, not to mention fellow commuters, won't be so appreciative.

At the halfway mark, *Chains* is so tremendous, striking an almost perfect beat of difficulty spikes, weapon upgrades and stupendous visual reveals, that you have to question its endurance. And, sadly, it flounders right on cue, limping repetitively to a close. New enemies stop coming, the same bosses return, and the quest becomes an endless medley of the same gruelling battles.

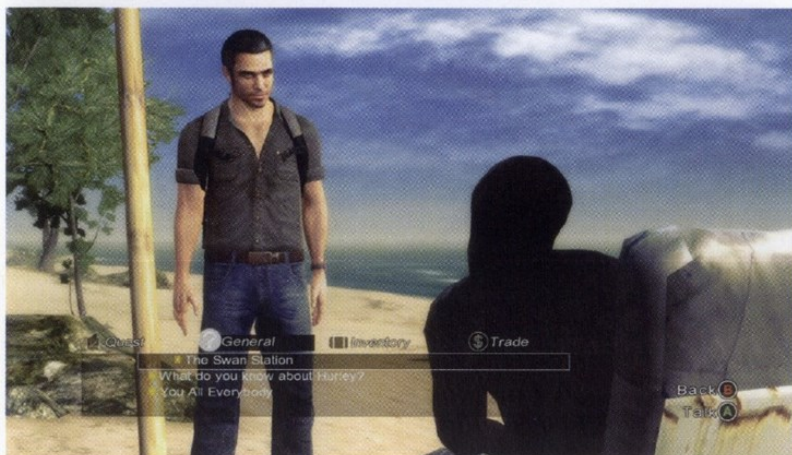
Kratos, the growling lapdog of the gods, can't carry *God Of War* on his own. And neither can his game's dialogue, story or grandstanding looks. This spectre haunted the series on PS2 but was, thanks to tireless spectacle and unpredictable tasks, kept largely at bay. Not so here, where an ability to numb you to the point of indifference is made all too clear by the end. It's a harsh thing to say but, as stunning as this game is, a few more skeletons and statues could have made all the difference.

[7]



LOST: THE VIDEOGAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (UBISOFT MONTREAL)



Lost is a bridge-burner of a television show; every grand revelation voids a chunk of past speculation. With future answers too valuable an asset for the show's makers to simply share with Ubisoft Montreal, the developer is instead forced to craft a tale out of narrative leftovers, a stale retelling of the first two seasons from a new pair of eyes.

Waking with no idea of who you are – “amnesia” offers Dr Shephard after poking your head for three seconds – *Lost* sets you off on your own little jaunt to discover your identity. Motivated by elements of your past that crashlanded on the island along with you – ghostly apparitions and the more pressing issue of a nutcase with a rifle – the game largely consists of cajoling

the show's famous faces into helping you unlock your past.

For the majority of the time this translates as basic fetch quests. From a nicely rendered beachy hub you chat with impressively recreated cast members who speak with unimpressively impersonated voices as they signpost you from point A to point B.

Navigation provides the meat of *Lost*, the confusing jungle paths only passable by tracking the physical markers that litter them.

While tracking offers faithfulness to the rambling-obsessed show, its delivery in the game feels unnaturally robotic. Finding a marker you are pointed towards the location of the next, the process of getting there hindered by regular guest appearances from the show's foggy villain, the black smoke. Nearby corpses will provide adequate cover from this creeping menace, but violent shifts in camera angle upon exiting these leafy sanctuaries prove disorientating and allow frustration to set in.

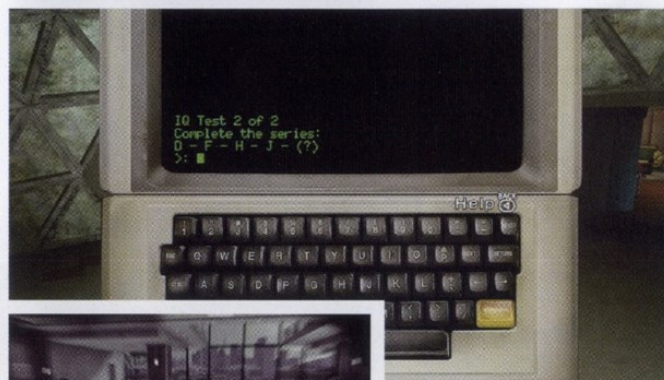
It is not the black smoke that most mystifies, however. That honour goes to a bizarre absence of game outside the jungle-based journeys. Mechanics are introduced and whisked away in the blink of an eye. A darkness-induced panic meter used to intensify cave navigation is explained mere minutes before the last cave path is walked.



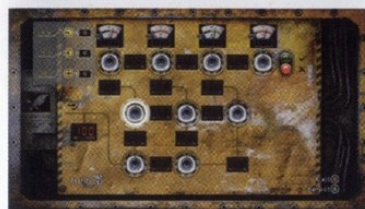
On one occasion the smoke has enough of your corpse-based cowardice and attempts a direct pursuit. The branch-hopping that follows is breathtakingly nimble, but soon joins *Lost*'s ever-growing pile of abandoned ideas



Lost sees the return of the glacial sheen that coated *Assassin's Creed*. Unlike that sprawling vision, however, the invisible boundaries of *Lost*'s island are far more evident to the eye



Probably the strongest moment of fan service is the chance to type the famed number sequence into the dusty computer. Hurley's photorealistic jowls come a close second



A circuit-flavoured take on *Pipe Mania* offers respite from the jungle sneaking. Not only do circuits need the right fuses, but the resistance of each fuse must be factored in so correct voltages are met when the juice reaches home

Elsewhere, an item-bartering system has you chasing the best deals on ammo and fuel that you'll never have the opportunity to use.

Lost feels truncated to the extreme, a grand tutorial to island living violently cut off when the credits roll after four hours. Does it serve a greater purpose as fan service? During his journey our hero can use his camera to snap key locations and props from the show. While this allows the game to revel in its aesthetic accuracy, it achieves nothing but turning our troubled amnesia-ridden hero into little more than some fanboy tourist lucky enough to stumble into ABC studios.

If the *Lost* fanbase is anything, it's thorough. The game is anything but.

Previously on *Lost*...



Attempts at replicating *Lost*'s flashbacks are something of a mixed bag. Triggered by events on the island, you are cast into a blurred memory. Focusing the moment is achieved by taking a clear photo of whatever it was that sparked the mental rewind. Verbal hints push you towards finding your subject, but timing and the clarity of the picture are down to you. Oddly, these sections are reminiscent of Desmond's forays into the present day in *Assassin's Creed*; glorified cutscenes that can't be furthered without the most basic of interactions. If Ubisoft Montreal had to repurpose its own material, why not borrow from that title's dedication to game mechanics, repetitive as they may have been?

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, ONLINE), TBA (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER: STARDOCK DEVELOPER: IRONCLAD
PREVIOUSLY IN: E185

Star tech



Each race has an entirely different tech-tree available to it. Or so it appears at first – soon you realise that each race just uses different jargon and that a lot of their technologies are equivalents. It's a nod to the game's otherwise unexplored fiction, but serves to obfuscate the abilities of each race. Nonetheless, though there is some overlap between individual technologies, the races don't reach them in the same order, creating brilliantly judged eddies in the strategy of each race at different stages of the game.

Sins Of A Solar Empire does a remarkable thing in bringing together both extremes of the strategy genre. On one side, you have the turn-based titles – grandly ponderous tales of epic conquest that are so beloved by beard-stroking megalomaniacs – and on the other you have the fraught battlefields of realtime strategy, traditionally the domain of turbo-clicking power-gamers. Following on from *Galactic Civilizations*, a turn-based depiction of cosmic ascendancy, developer Ironclad has now attempted to bring a sweeping historical arc, interstellar scale and long-term strategy into realtime; *Sins Of A Solar Empire* combines micro and macro with startling success, if not always elegance.

The ability to zoom from a view of the star systems you've explored all the way down to individual ships is matched by a tactical scaling, giving you continual control over the broader form of your empire and the rules of engagement for each individual ship. This alone is a remarkable achievement, made possible by the Empire Tree, a collapsible and searchable directory of all your possessions. Like much else in *Sins*, this



Efficient play relies heavily on a long list of hotkeys. The option to pause the game, and yet still issue orders, makes this less critical



Individual battles can take a long time to resolve, giving you plenty of scope to micromanage the individual combat abilities of your ships, reinforce your frontline or consider retreating your beleaguered units to safer planetary orbits

is utterly overwhelming at first, and even later on the game's ambition occasionally outstrips the abilities of its mouse-led interface. The lack of decent tutorials makes its initial opacity all the more intimidating.

Setting the (otherwise challenging) AI to easy, however, should give even the biggest dawdler space to learn the ropes, even if the finer points of managing your economies and trade routes require a little more investigation. Persist in your ungainly ascent of the learning curve and a game approaching exquisite levels of craft and detail emerges from the ether, and promptly devours hours of your life. The three playable races are cleverly, rather than overtly, distinguished from each other in their economies, technology and units, and the

tempo of play for each race is elegantly manipulated by the subtleties of their various research trees (see 'Star tech'). Ship classes have also been well considered, making your fleet's combined skillset a vital key to success in any one engagement – particularly with regards to your upgradeable and highly customisable capital ships.

Although the singleplayer doesn't offer a campaign, the large number of preset scenarios that Ironclad has supplied is not to be sniffed at; the configuration of interlinked gravity wells which contain the game's action necessitate dramatically different approaches, and the random level generator produces environments that are just as challenging. In multiplayer, the diplomacy system becomes delightfully Machiavellian when human opponents are being bartered with or betrayed – and there is the option to save and resume games so as to avoid untenably lengthy wars.

Sins is undoubtedly a unique achievement, unifying realtime battle and empirical strategy where others have only managed to offer them as separate components. And though its depth is more than a little overwhelming, and though its interface may occasionally stumble, such things are hardly out of keeping with the immensity of its task. After all, no one said subjugating a galaxy should be easy. [8]

Pirates play a more prominent role in *Sins* than the barbarians of the *Civilization* series – here you are in a constant bidding war with other factions to ensure that the top bounty stays on your opponent's head





PROF LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBC (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5
PREVIOUSLY IN: E174

It is a curious village. One that revolves entirely around puzzles: the market traders are obsessed with measurements, the people in cafes simply besotted with chess problems, and the local writer can't stop trying to trick you with a sleight-of-word almost every time he sees you. Every villager has a puzzle they want solving, and the village itself stands over it all with an excellent (though largely divorced) mystery of its own to work through.

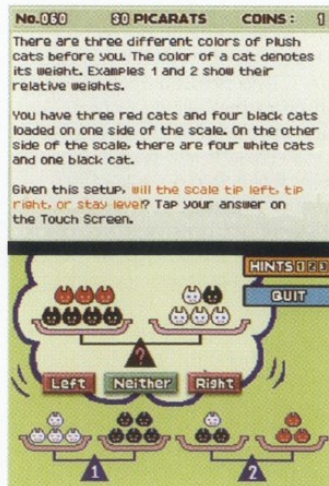
But for all that Professor Layton's world is built out of problems, the game itself is almost free of them. In essence a simple point-and-click adventure, it is built around solving puzzles to advance the ongoing mystery: each one is quite distinct (the odd one or two go through harder iterations) and the interfaces are uniformly excellent. Easily understandable and bright, not a single example has counter-intuitive elements. The only black mark comes into focus in one or two where a slightly-too-keen desire to be obfuscatory leads the puzzle into error: in particular, asserting that an analogue clock with both hands at 12 would be read as '0' seems a little dubious. But those occurrences really are the exceptions.

The Tintin aesthetic of Layton's world is appealing, and the relatively



Don't worry, not all of the characters have Giuseppe's sense of humour – but they do all have little quirks that add to the sense of place

small cast are well-distinguished characters. The translation is also well pitched, treading a fine line between ye olde gentleman and clarity – although the Dick Van Dyke tendencies in the voicing of Layton's assistant are a little too cringeworthy. And if the story has a rather nonsensical twist then, well, that's how these faux-Victorian mysteries tend to end. There are a lot of puzzles, a fun environment to tootle around in, and little to dislike. Utterly charming. [7]



Both of the above, and in fact the vast majority of puzzles in the game, have answers that seem incredibly obvious once you know them, or work out a quirky method. There will be lots of head-slapping moments



APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E183



Klavier

It's worth even more than VIP passes to one of my concerts, ja?

This episode's new prosecutor is Klavier, rock god and legal wunderkind. He doesn't quite rival *Trials And Tribulations'* Godot, but does bring one of the best new musical themes to the mix

As both successor to fan-favourite Wright and as Capcom's first DS-specific attempt at *Gyakuten Saiban*, *Justice* is under great scrutiny. An extra case was grafted to the straight GBA port of *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* as a DS-exclusive treat and a little taste of things to come. Alas, what was thought to be the prototype is revealed here to be the finished article.

With courtroom battles largely hinging on Justice's ability to read minor guilt-ridden visual tells – complete with a new cry of "Gotcha!" – it seems ironic that the changes to the Wright formula are so minutely hidden away. Yes, Justice's new shriek adds a trick to his repertoire, but besides this and a few touchscreen forensic gizmos this there is little change from the GBA ports.

The point-and-click process of investigation and the penalty-driven risks of in-court accusations are as limited as they ever were, still playing second fiddle to narrative drive. The drama of each case has been heightened with FMV intros that set a more obviously cinematic tone and the great addition of seeing the ludicrous slaying scenarios played out in CSI-styled re-enactments.

As ever, it's during time spent with a delightful cast of characters that *Justice* really delivers. While more time is needed to warm to the younger presence of Justice himself, the

decision to pair to him with magician Trucy – and, indeed, mix illusions into all of the four cases – adds a distinct dash of Jonathan Creek, refreshing after the stale spirit-medium angle of Wright's adventures.

Without giving too much away, it is interesting that the plot eventually raises the question of judicial change, the court system of the original games put on trial as its flaws grow more and more evident. It's the kind of self reflection that makes for a neat story; if Capcom takes it on board it could make for a neat game, too. [6]



Observing a witness during their testimony for facial tics and flinches adds a visual challenge to a game that's largely steeped in logic puzzles



PENUMBRA: BLACK PLAGUE

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: PARADOX INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: FRICTIONAL GAMES

Game physics celebrates the mundane. If videogames were once about expressing worlds of extremes, with the advent of physics they've become infatuated with the trivial – principally things falling off other things realistically. And *Black Plague*, a follow-up and hurried conclusion to last year's *Overture*, takes game physics at its most humdrum. This HP Lovecraft-themed firstperson adventure game contains physics puzzles that are often less cerebral challenges than the need to pile up boxes to get over railings, or laboriously work a couple of poles over a gap to make an impromptu bridge.

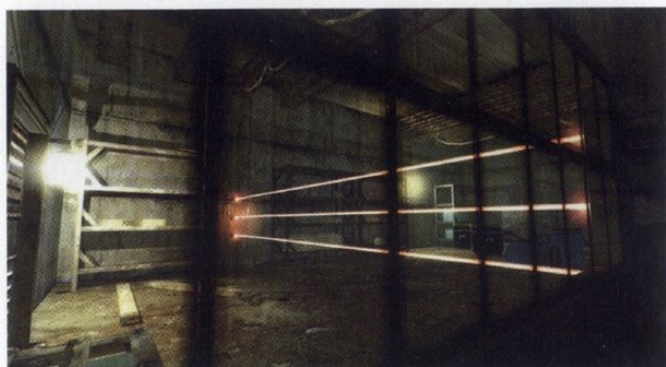
Some puzzles, such as using an iron bar as a lever on a locked door, are more satisfying because they invite more interesting interactions between objects and create a rewarding sense of improvisation. But, much as real-world logic is king here and puzzles are naturalistically worked into the gameworld, there's usually only one solution to each, because *Penumbra* at its heart is a glorified graphic adventure game. Though mouse-driven, this isn't quite point-and-click. Physics-based interaction is driven by moving the mouse in a manner analogous to the task in hand – clicking and holding on a valve and turning it, for instance, or opening doors by pulling. But because the game is attempting to map the mouse's 2D motion to 3D space, it can be awfully fiddly, requiring awkward shuffling around an object of interest



Though fighting has been removed from *Black Plague*, the stealth system remains, which involves crouching motionless in shadow to become invisible. It's rarely needed, however

to find the right angle at which to manipulate it.

The story is, like the monotonously dilapidated laboratory it's set in, hackneyed; the script is a little hammy and there are some clunky attempts at apparently *Portal*-inspired humour. But, for all its overall shortness, *Black Plague* is well paced. There's only the most sporadic contact with enemies, and, unlike in *Overture*, you cannot fight them. And though the setting is clichéd and you'll have experienced all the tricks Frictional has pulled to construct *Black Plague*'s menacing atmosphere before (echoed voices, bestial groans, oppressive shadows, flickering lights), they're highly effective. Sadly, however, eldritch threat just isn't enough to make this a more memorable experience. [6]

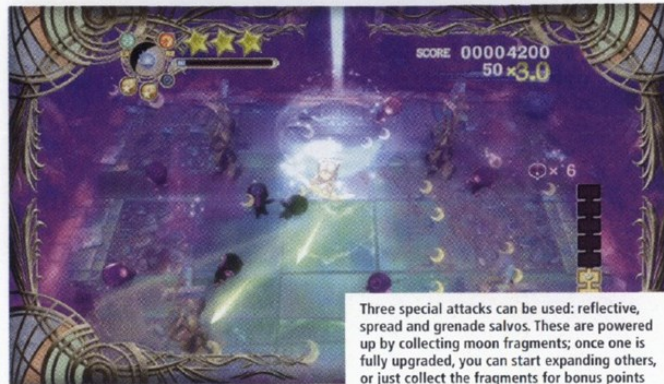


About an hour into the game, your character develops a malevolent alter ego called Clarence, who verbally bullies and mocks you, an unnerving extra presence in the Arctic science installation setting



DARK MIST

FORMAT: PS3 (PSN) RELEASE: TBC
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: GAME REPUBLIC



Three special attacks can be used: reflective, spread and grenade salvos. These are powered up by collecting moon fragments; once one is fully upgraded, you can start expanding others, or just collect the fragments for bonus points

Looks like an angelic dungeon crawler, plays like *Smash TV* – but *Dark Mist* is a twin-stick shooter that doesn't require a twin. There's no multiplayer in Game Republic's luscious top-down blaster, which seems like an oversight until its score-attack nature comes to the fore. With just 12 brief levels, it doesn't take long. What initially appears to be an effusive, action-heavy riff on *Zelda*'s 2D dungeon hikes soon ups the intensity to the point that finding the colour-coded keys needed to progress is hardly your main objective.

The titular mist is a dense black fog that appears on virtually every screen, in various formations. Stepping into it will reduce visibility to nearly zero, leaving you to depend on enemy bullets to keep track of their whereabouts and the layout of barriers and pits. Sometimes, the screen slowly fills with shadow, and can only be cleared with a smart bomb or by destroying special 'Darkness' enemies, a number of which need to be culled in order to reach the next stage.

A combo meter gradually ticks up with each kill, depleting over time and

adding urgency to your room-to-room roaming, or reset when you take a hit. Bonus points are added for taking out multiple enemies with a single special attack, too. These two aspects, by and large, make up *Dark Mist*'s score-chasing strategy, which may seem like slim pickings. But it's what allows it to ride such an accessible line between breadth and depth, feeling immediate without demanding flick-knife reactions or esoteric knowledge for players to dig in.

Even then, once the main game is cleared – it *has* to be clocked in one play session, but it's far from lengthy – hard mode is unlocked (plus a pair of affable bonus modes) which doesn't just up the difficulty, but completely rewrites the dungeon structures and enemy patterns. That it achieves a balance between challenge and a sense of progress is one thing; that it manages to fizz with a wealth of lighting, crisp colours and instructive sound design helps cement one of the strongest PSN offerings since 'true' twin-stick shooters *Everyday Shooter* and *Super Stardust HD*. [8]



A dodge roll offers invincibility for the length of its animation. Roll off the edge of a platform, however, and you'll plummet



SEGA SUPERSTARS TENNIS

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, Wii
RELEASE: MARCH 21 (US), MARCH 28 (UK) PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SUMO DIGITAL PREVIOUSLY IN: £186



There are few companies with as attractive and diverse a back catalogue as Sega: from *OutRun* to *Space Channel 5*, there's little but fond memories throughout the company's software history. So *Sega Superstars Tennis* is a perfect fit, a chance for a selection of the key franchises to get an airing along with plenty of in-jokes – and a diversion while we await the next *Virtua Tennis*.

The game's basics are tournaments, challenges and minigames. The minigames and challenges are a mixed bunch, although the magic of four players makes the best very good indeed and the worst bearable. The tennis itself is straightforward, with the controls concentrating on simplicity and the characters fitting loosely into the standard categories of speed, power, and so on. Each also has a special move (which can be triggered after momentum has been built up), which in the main are based around



The 'trick shot' challenge in the Super Monkey Ball court is well thought out, and will take more than a few tries to get exactly right

visual confusion rather than nuclear shots. Games are tight, allowing for some considerable subtlety in shot placement and tactics, while the courts are wonderful, particularly the *Samba De Amigo*-styled arena.

The game's biggest problem lies with its painful loading times, which occur between menus and on the character select screen, and serve to exacerbate niggles like having to return to a main menu while progressing through individual challenges on a single stage. That bugbear aside, *Sega Superstars Tennis* is well-crafted, lovingly garish, and it plays a solid game. Even if Ulala taunting Gilius Thunderhead means nothing to you, it's worth a shot. [7]



The 'Afterburner' and 'OutRun' Achievements on 360 have only a slight link to their respective titles, but raise a smile for that very reason



SPACE INVADERS EXTREME

FORMAT: DS, PSP (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), JUNE 10 (US), TBA (EUROPE)
PUBLISHER: TAITO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: £182

Space Invaders: left, right, fire, 5/10. That's the way it should go, right? That's the way it has always gone with Taito's updating of its seminal shooter: versions that added little more than the coloured strips, versions that tinkered vainly, and versions that went disastrously 3D. *Space Invaders Extreme* isn't any of the above, and the reason behind that simple: it has the confidence to simply steal great ideas and bolt them on to that still-classic central mechanic. And it does it extremely well.

The *Lumines* influence is the most obvious: techno music plays and, as your shots hit the invaders, little beats are added. The music speeds up at moments of crisis, synchs loosely with the functionally disco backgrounds, and adds immeasurably to the sense of immersion. There are now multiple types of enemy, colour coded for chaining, with attacks that will see them dive-bomb, deflect bullets back or even begin suicide runs. All, of course, while slowly inching right then down then left then down.

The reimaginings change the threat you'll face while retaining that hint of the familiar, and they're put to varied



Stages are broken up by bonus rounds triggered by shooting a particular flying saucer – each sets you a timed challenge, such as shooting a saucer surrounded by three layers of whirling invaders, that if met triggers the high-scoring 'fever' mode

use throughout the branching (and challenging) arcade mode that's destined to become a favourite among score-attack fans. Equally compulsive is the excellent versus mode, based around the *Tetris* multiplayer that allows you to watch your opponent's moves while plotting their destruction.

Extreme is similar to *Pac-Man: Championship Edition* in the way it reinvents a gaming classic, and proves that the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of yesteryear can still captivate. It's engrossing, a stiff challenge and a fine addition to a venerable history. And among its achievements, there is a particularly noticeable one. *Extreme* reminds you why *Space Invaders* caused such a stir in the first place. [8]



Some of the new enemies' attack patterns raise a chuckle: the first time you line up under a particular type to deliver the killing blow and they, for want of a better description, belly-slam your ship is a highlight



Sony's premiere slice of scareware refuses to take you by the hand – but that's entirely the point

Sony's suffocating survival horror was all too happy to show players that they weren't alone in the dark. Effective horror hinges on what can't be clearly seen; the *Silent Hill* games thrive on this, defined as much by what *isn't* on the game disc as what is. But *Forbidden Siren* took a taboo step, empowering its characters with a skill that exceeds the finest in hi-tech espionage hacking: sightjacking. It handed you the power to see far more than most games had ever dared. And yet it didn't spoil the tension, only stretched it tighter across the throats of those who pressed their noses up against the looking glass. Sightjacking is psychic radar, both curse and blessing to the game's playable cast of around a dozen characters, convened in the remote Japanese village of Hanuda. But it's not about seeing your enemies without them seeing you; it's

murderous attentions and time your moment to best slip by. But hitchhiking a ride in a shibito's comatose mind can leave you with unexpected souvenirs, reminders of the people they once were before succumbing to the invocations of the cult that has corrupted Hanuda and turned its surroundings into an ominous red ocean. One villager sits behind a slatted fence, forever scraping away at the small flower bed, an echo of past instincts. Often, such piggybacking is accompanied by unpleasant gibbering and grunting. As insights go, it's as potent as any cutscene in articulating the evil that has choked the inhabitants, and serves to double up your desire to go undetected. Worse still, being spotted results in a panic-button moment: you're alerted to the fact by a heartbeat-flash of sightjacking, courtesy of the shibito that has

The shibito are beautifully grotesque creations, and the player's avatars are rendered with authentic photorealism, with the faces of actors

about seeing through their eyes, passively tuning yourself in to their cone of vision, channel-surfing the brainwashed brainwaves of the shibito, *Siren's* zombie-like aggressors.

Sightjacking is a triumphant collision of contexts. Functionally, it allows you to monitor the patrols of nearby shibito, to avoid their

noticed you. It's just long enough for you to *think* that you're able to tell which direction you'll be approached from, but the unexpected, pants-down nature of such a blip can easily scramble your ability to think clearly. And it results in numerous genuine jump-scares, without ever having to resort to the predictable B-movie tactic of asking you to slowly pull back the shower curtain in return for a cheap 'boo!' moment. Mercifully, there's an option to change the alert so that the screen pulses red, but where's the fun in that? You're here, of course, because you want to be unsettled.

Being detected involves a whole different kind of fear, one upon which survival horror games have operated since *Resident Evil* baptised the genre: clumsiness. Sticky combat. Muddy character control. *Siren* epitomises



Shibito can't be killed, only briefly stunned. 'Lesser' shibito are met early on, while 'true' shibito, deformed freaks that can scamper up walls or alert a whole stage's enemies to you, lurk later in the game

these failings, in a pinch. Of course, the helplessness of a character is key to invoking a sense of fear and terror. But the get-out clause of a caught-up civilian being incapable of defending themselves well can only stretch so far. Ungainly swipes with an iron pipe or cock-eyed pistol pops don't just run the risk of irritation. Such a feeling of being ill-equipped puts a person ill at ease in a manner that was never intended. It castrates the atmosphere, and can even cause it, disastrously, to descend into comedy. It's disastrous because much of a horror game's technology is often dedicated to atmospherics.

Survival horror titles exchange flexibility for co-ordinated dread. Remove camera controls, and *Resident Evil's* frigid, prerendered backdrops can convey a greater sense of location. Similarly, *Fatal Frame* can direct its perspective to make the most of the haunted, stained furniture in its environments, and realise them more vividly. *Siren's* trade-off is in character richness: the shibito are beautifully grotesque creations, and the player's avatars are rendered with authentic photorealism, utilising the faces of actors, to beguiling effect in cutscenes and often during play itself. The relationship between these two factions is heightened immensely by

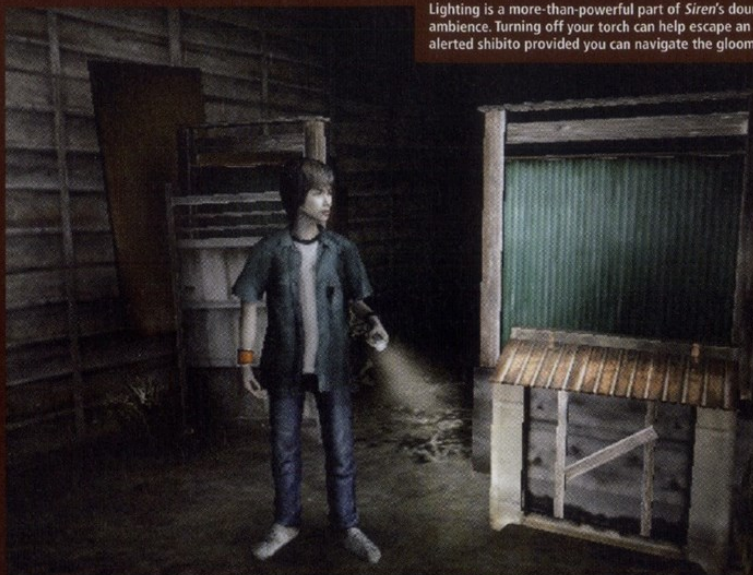


To flesh out the narrative, each stage features a handful of archive items to collect, from notes to ID cards to drawings, paintings and magazine covers



SECOND COMING

Released in 2006, *Forbidden Siren 2* features the same crazy-paving mesh of plots, centred on several people capsized by a blood-red tsunami of water during a boat trip, trapping them on Yamijima island. The timeline/character interrelationship deepens somewhat, while the core aspect of confrontation expands in both directions. Soldier characters offer greater attack strength, while others display unprecedented weakness – one is extremely poorly sighted, and has to sightjack his guide dog, relying on not just its eyes but also its movements. It's a typically fearsome idea for the series, a daringly high-concept but accident-prone approach that can leave players feeling either gobsmacked or happy-slapped.



Lighting is a more-than-powerful part of *Siren's* dour ambience. Turning off your torch can help escape an alerted shibito provided you can navigate the gloom



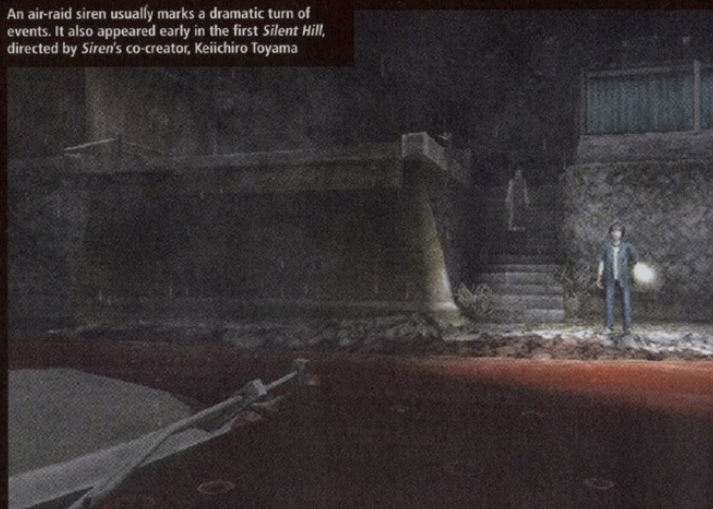
RPGs, lest any chills turn all too readily into chuckles.

The line between player vulnerability and player confidence is a hazardous one for an interactive experience to walk, but a necessary one. Too much ability and agility will compromise susceptibility, or convert it into something else entirely. It's the power of that common nightmare, where attempting to flee from danger becomes infinitely more unnerving when your legs turn to leaden mush and your feet struggle to ascend a staircase. With *Resident Evil 4*, Capcom armed Leon Kennedy to the point that fight-or-flight simply became full-on fight, and survival horror became survival action. *Fatal Frame* enables the player by equipping them with a camera capable of exorcism, but reels you back in by forcing you to use it in firstperson, accompanied by slow movement and a need to get uncomfortably close to the enemy. *Siren* offered a superhuman insight into enemy movements, and demanded it be applied with care and caution, penalising not just with the threat of death but also the threat of galling, growling aggravation.

Forbidden Siren, then, is primarily a stealth game that also draws on quiet and hunched movements and the use of darkness. But trying to marry such an oft-awkward play style with an accomplished air of

sightjacking, but bring them too close together and things can seize up to the point of crumbling. Which seems like the ideal juncture for raising an inevitable point: the voice dub that graced (and disgraced) the UK release of *Forbidden Siren* was a comical miscast, a bizarre own-goal in terms of localisation. Aside from the questionable quality of the vocal acting presented, there's a higher flaw at work here: if a game is going to rely on the faces of actual Japanese actors, and is staged in a believably authentic Japanese village, even the most Oscar-worthy English dialogue track is going to suffer from culture clash. *Forbidden Siren 2* (see 'Second coming') addressed these reasonable complaints by offering not just a superior voiceover effort, but also an alternative, subtitled language track. Such a respectful inclusion needn't be the preserve of Japanese

An air-raided siren usually marks a dramatic turn of events. It also appeared early in the first *Silent Hill*, directed by *Siren's* co-creator, Keiichi Toyama



Naoko Mihama



Name Naoko Mihama
Age 28 Sex Female
Occupation TV reporter

6

- ☐ Items
- ☐ Archive
- ☒ Link Navigator
- ☐ Mission Objective
- ☐ Options
- ☐ Retry
- ☐ Title screen
- ☐ Exit

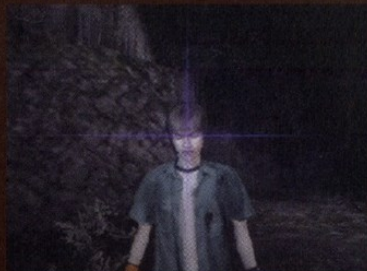
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Link Navigator

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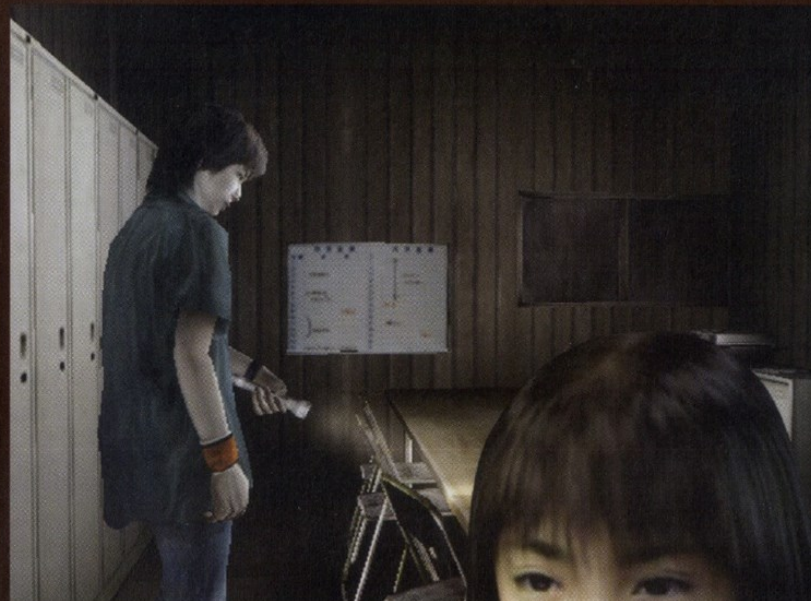
TIME EXTEND



The player twinkles if in an enemy's cone of vision, even if not detected. You're usually reminded of this at the jumpy moment you sightjack one gazing straight at you

anxiety wasn't its only ambition. Its belief in complexity is almost daredevil. While survival horror plotlines are often enigmatic, coquettish or just plain cloaked, *Siren* decided to weave an episodic experience on a par with a series of *Lost*. Darting from character to character, from timeframe to timeframe, each scene and stage would gradually fill out a dizzying grid of hour-by-hour chunks; for anyone used to being spoon-fed a narrative, this was like opening a Russian doll only to be greeted by an onion made from Lego. The reward for perseverance? A vivid colouring-in of the game's backdrop; you felt part of it, rather than merely an audience to it.

Sightjacking, too, adds an extra load. A shoulder button activates the



This is both *Siren's* strength and its downfall. In a genre where the player's willingness to suspend disbelief is almost everything – including their patience to chew through a lack of interactive slickness – it risked more than any other horror title in recent memory. We want surprise, but we don't want to be inconvenienced. We want to be shocked, but not broadsided. We

In a genre where the player's willingness to suspend disbelief is almost everything, it risked more than any other horror title in recent memory

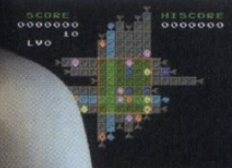
power; the left stick 'tunes' you in to nearby shibito, allowing you to shortcut each set of eyes to a face button. It's an atypical demand: having to not just remember how you've allocated each 'channel', but also monitor, memorise and consolidate the patrols of shibito around areas that you're likely not yet familiar with, sometimes before your character has actually gone anywhere in a level. It can be an intimidating amount of recon, which again treads a fine line: the sense of malevolence is heightened, but so is the exasperation if it all falls apart.

want to be drawn in, not spat out. We want sophistication, not vexation. Fundamentally, videogames are about progress, and scares are all about interruption – getting the two to sit well together must be challenging to the point of being irresistible to some game creators. And so it is with *Siren*, a whopping curate's egg, a game that will often bite the hands you're trying to feed it with. But surviving its horrors, both stylistic and mechanical, will reward you with one of the claggiest and most cloying involvements to be had on a PlayStation 2.



ZUNO EVIL, HEAR NO EVIL

Tucked away in the very depths of *Forbidden Siren* is something with a light heart rather than a crushingly dark one: Zuno, a minigame unlocked by collecting a certain archive item. AKA 'Brain Cell Revival', it's revealed as a gift from outer space that offers mental stimulation 'for the entire family!' It's a cute little wink rather than anything more violent, a block-sliding puzzler that needs you to colour-match sets of blobs. It's charming, but far from cheery; the retro style and cold tone results in Zuno being a distraction that's strangely fitting, rather than daft. Regardless, it's nowhere near as stressful and discordant as *Kunitoris*, an unlockable minigame to be found in *Forbidden Siren 2*.



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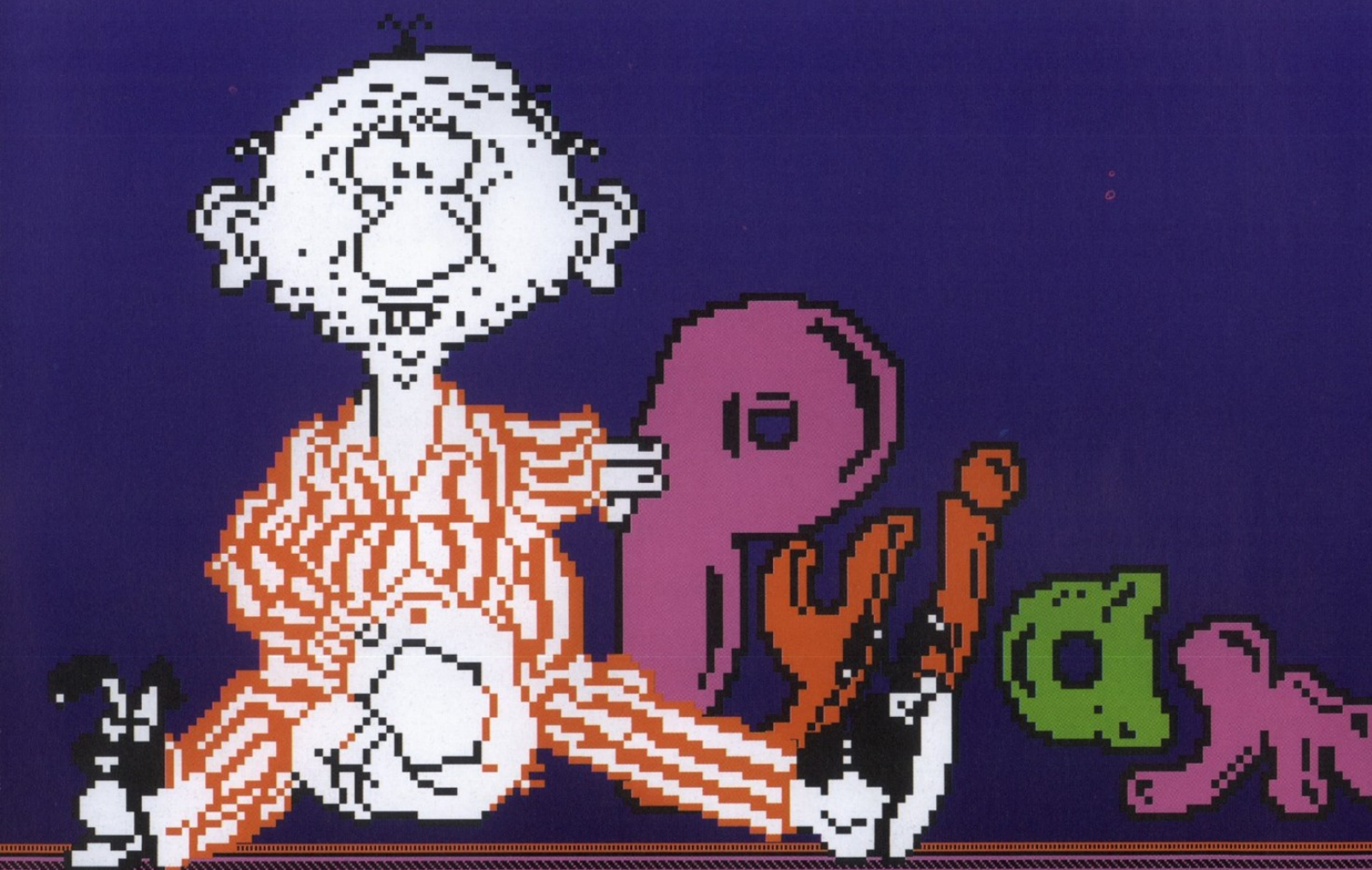
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THE MAKING OF...

PYJAMARAMA

A blue-collar worker, a dodgy alarm and a journey to the moon: such things dreams are made of

FORMAT: ZX SPECTRUM 48K PUBLISHER: MIKRO-GEN DEVELOPER: CHRIS HINSLEY ORIGIN: UK RELEASE: 1984

Wally Week is your average kind of videogame character. In fact, it's his averageness that makes him special. In a world of fantasy superheroes, stealth assassins and adventurers, his humdrum everyday existence is a refreshing change of pace. And that's as true now as it was when he was created back in 1984.

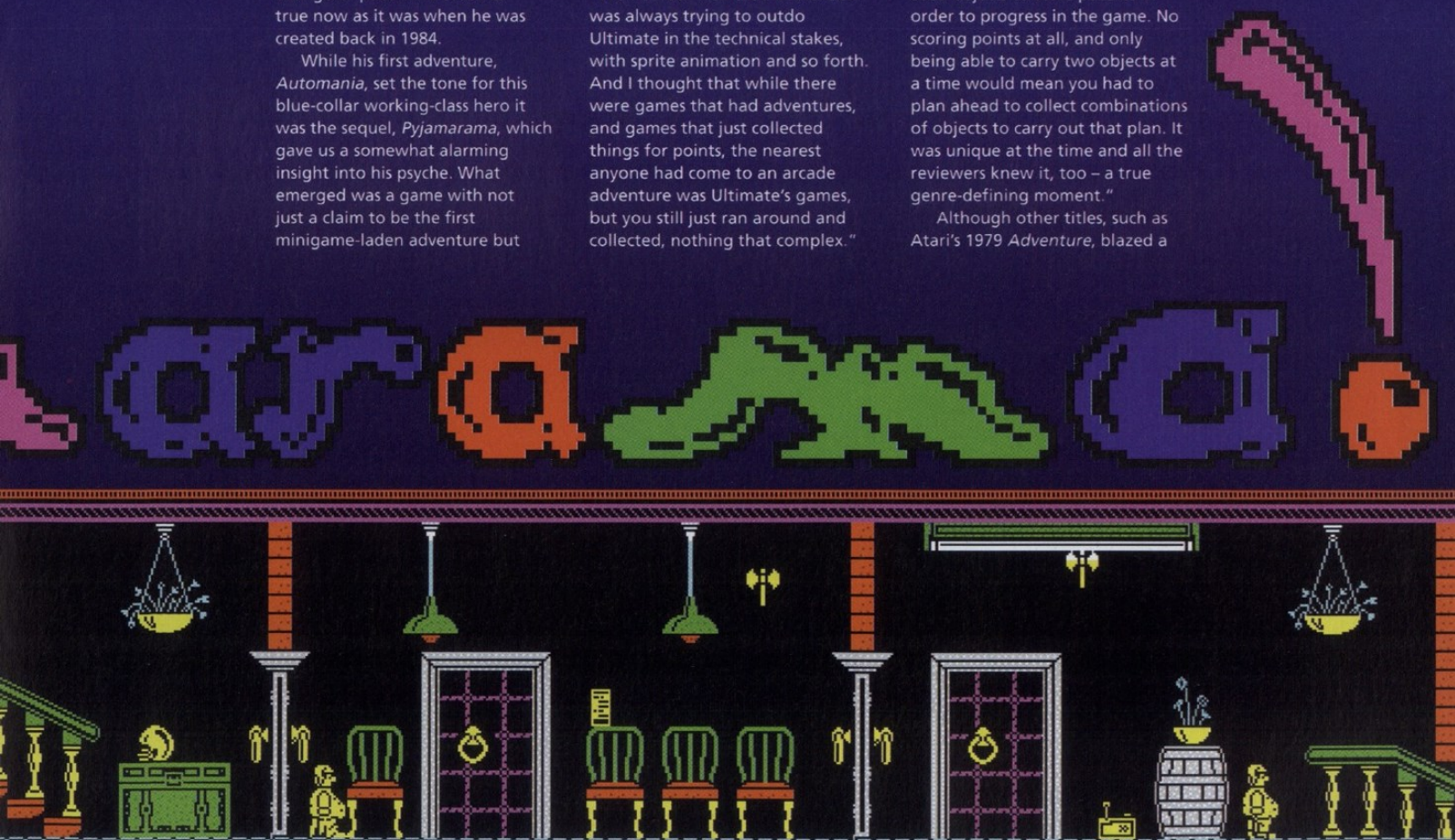
While his first adventure, *Automania*, set the tone for this blue-collar working-class hero it was the sequel, *Pyjamarama*, which gave us a somewhat alarming insight into his psyche. What emerged was a game with not just a claim to be the first minigame-laden adventure but

also a slapstick pastiche that owed more to the Chuckle Brothers than Mario Bros.

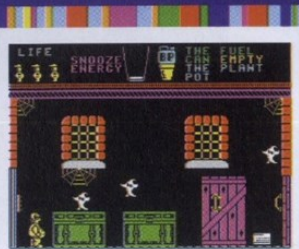
"Around this time there was a competition going on between the top companies to always get the next feature into a game," recalls **Chris Hinsley**, the game's creator. "I remember well that Mikro-Gen was always trying to outdo Ultimate in the technical stakes, with sprite animation and so forth. And I thought that while there were games that had adventures, and games that just collected things for points, the nearest anyone had come to an arcade adventure was Ultimate's games, but you still just ran around and collected, nothing that complex."

As with many projects of this period, Hinsley had a great deal of autonomy. "I had the responsibility for the entire game: programming, graphics, sound – you name it, I did it. So I had the idea that *Pyjamarama* should be the first true arcade adventure where you used objects to solve puzzles in order to progress in the game. No scoring points at all, and only being able to carry two objects at a time would mean you had to plan ahead to collect combinations of objects to carry out that plan. It was unique at the time and all the reviewers knew it, too – a true genre-defining moment."

Although other titles, such as Atari's 1979 *Adventure*, blazed a



Pyjamarama's influence was significant, and clearly fed into other 8bit titles, such as David Jones' Magic Knight series, starting with *Finders Keepers*



NIGHTMARES AND DREAMSCAPES

Pyjamarama was an eminently charming game, playing around with the videogame form and using its surreal premise to maximum effect. The *Space Invaders*-style minigame hinted at Wally's – and gamers' in general – obsession with the growing craze for videogame entertainment, suggesting that games had the power to infect our psyches, even in our dreams. But as well as providing a very diverting skill game, clearing waves of chickens with knife and fork projectiles also topped up Wally's Snooze-O-Meter, giving him valuable extra lives.

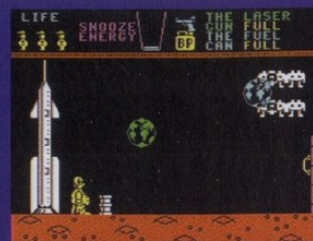
trail for all arcade adventures, *Pyjamarama*'s puzzle dynamic and logic triggers certainly took the principle in a new direction. The premise was simple: Wally's alarm clock needs to be wound up to ensure the snoozing mechanic gets to work on time. It's your job to take Wally's astral alter-ego around the house and find the key to the clock.

Although *Automania* contained just two rooms, it gave Hinsley the experience and confidence to come up with the logic that would drive the sequel. "I drew up rooms on A3 pads and worked out how they would be connected through the doors and tunnels, etc. There was to be an object in each room that could be swapped for what you carried. Objects would also have triggers set to activate when you walked over a certain location with the correct set of carried objects in the correct states."

Though it contained 31 rooms in all, Hinsley treated the game like a single level with its structure revolving around object movement

and manipulation. A small puzzle would be focused in every individual room, with each solution adding to the whole. "Things were structured so that like a good novel there are several independent threads that start and can be followed in isolation, but eventually they meet at some point and become dependant. So you could follow certain puzzles until you got to a point where you needed an object or trigger from another room, and that state couldn't be achieved until a thread of another few puzzles had been solved."

A large part of the game's appeal was derived from the mental gymnastics required to solve the puzzles. Sliding down the banisters in order to swap the ignition keys for the helmet and leaving a laser gun on the moon were just two of the triggers requiring an imaginative approach to puzzle solving. Despite this, Hinsley was surprised by how soon fans solved the game, with maps and solutions appearing in popular



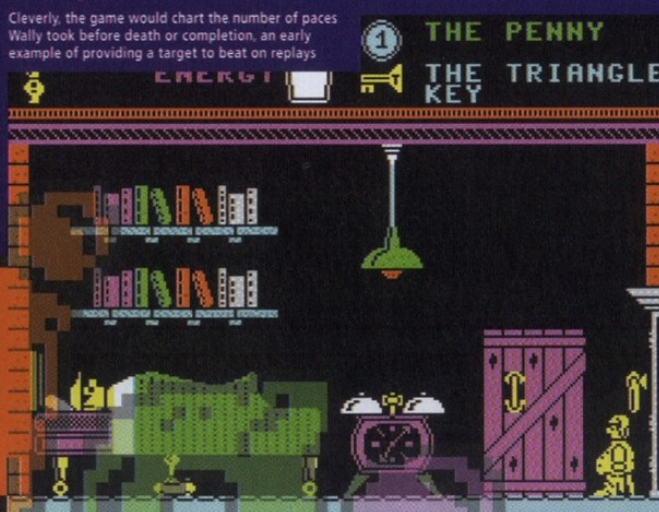
gaming magazines just weeks after launch.

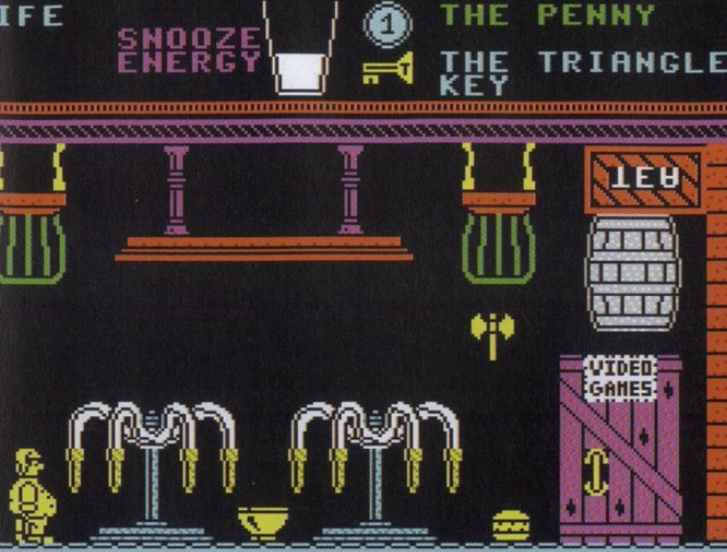
Though the item swapping proved to be a smooth and accomplished gameplay dynamic, it did require a meticulous attention to detail and some clever logic. "I needed to come up with ways to allow the rooms to be encoded, both the drawing and the adventure logic side of things. This is one of the things I still get email about today – some guys have hacked the old Z80 binary and worked out where all the room drawing and adventure logic is and have re-coded it for machines like the PC. *Pyjamarama* has a huge retro coding following, something I'm very proud of."

The somnambulist backstory also allowed Hinsley to create a range of powerful images, rooms and puzzles with the strength to live long in the memory: fuelling the rocket to take a trip to the moon, large comedic boxing gloves ready to punch the hapless character in the face, and entering the videogame room to indulge in a surreal version of *Space Invaders* to name just three (see 'Nightmares and dreamscapes').

Originally, Hinsley drew everything to scale but in reality things looked 'spindly and rather crap'. Again, the premise came to his rescue: once the objects and background items were enlarged for effect, the game began to take shape, giving it a freaky, nightmarish tone. In this regard, *Pyjamarama* was like many games

Cleverly, the game would chart the number of paces Wally took before death or completion, an early example of providing a target to beat on replays





of its era in that the gameplay and visuals gave rise to the plot rather than the other way round.

The vibrant dreamlike imagery gave *Pyjamarama* its distinctive flavour but it also allowed Hinsley to cut a few corners. "Some of the technical challenges were handled rather blatantly. Remember the good old attribute problem on the ZX Spectrum where fixed squares of 64 pixels could only have two colours? Well, my approach on *Pyjamarama* was 'Bollocks to that, let Wally just carry around a block of colour with him and to hell with

"Pyjamarama won a Golden Joystick award, but all I remember is throwing up in the toilets of The Inn On The Park in London"

it'. I didn't think it would matter, and most reviewers didn't care when it came down to it."

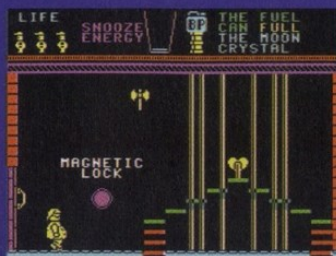
Pyjamarama took just three months to complete, and during that time Hinsley also wrote a powerful editor that went on to be used by thousands of developers. "That three months included the time to create sprite-editing tools outside work because Mikro-Gen didn't think I could justify spending the time to create them in-house, rather than drawing sprites on graph paper and hand-coding them in data statements in the assembler source. I definitely won that argument the first day I brought in my editor to show people. We never from that moment onward

typed in a sprite table again. That initial sprite editor got updated and updated and eventually was used by Rainbird as the Atari ST version of The Advanced OCP Art Studio which became for a few years the industry-standard tool for sprite and background graphics creation."

The game was a huge success, garnering rave reviews and establishing Mikro-Gen as a publishing powerhouse in the process. Hinsley was quickly put on to the next Wally game,

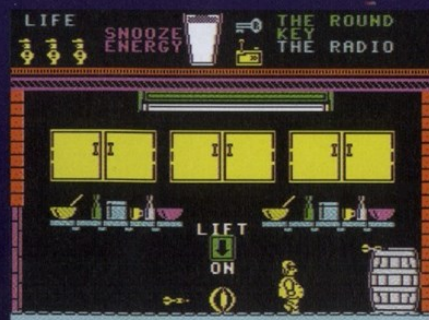
Everyone's A Wally, but while he expanded the formula further, the magic was beginning to wane. "What I started out to do was to improve and expand on what *Pyjamarama* had done. The way forward was to introduce multiple characters, each with their own objectives and each with certain skills. So now to solve the game you needed the correct character with the correct object to trigger the logic in the rooms. This could have proved a little too frustrating but I think things worked out OK. Certainly *Everyone's A Wally* was a huge hit with the reviewers and the public.

"But I think things went off the boil at the point. I would like to say it was because I lost interest in



the Wally franchise and moved on to other things, and that the guys that came after me on the programming team were just turning the handle. But to be fair on them, I think Wally had kind of run its course. David Perry, who joined Mikro-Gen around the time I was doing *Everyone's A Wally*, did the ports on to Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC. He eventually did *Herbert's Dummy Run* as an original title – that was just a total re-spin of the *Pyjamarama* code – and then *Three Weeks In Paradise* which was original and had some new ideas that Dave should be credited for."

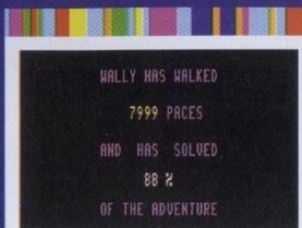
But it is *Pyjamarama* that remains Wally's finest hour; this disarmingly ordinary man thrown into an eccentric dreamscape has captured imaginations ever since it was released. But for Hinsley the awards and accolades mean less than the retro remakes the game spawned. "*Pyjamarama* won a Golden Joystick award, but all I remember is being stuck throwing up in the toilets of The Inn On The Park in London. Dave Perry stepped in and collected the award for me. I never was into the fame and celebrity stuff but for Dave it was the start of a career in self publishing and image management."



Every room featured projectiles, ranging from darts to axes, but players also had to beware ghoulish hands emerging from the floor

The nightmarish tone was largely down to Hinsley's adoption of oversized sprites. The distorted sense of reality was rarely bettered in 8bit computer games

THE MAKING OF...



MIKROPLUS MESS

Around the time *Pyjamarama* was being developed Mikro-Gen began designing a hardware add-on for the Spectrum called the Mikroplus. The expandable ROM pack plugged into the back of the Spectrum, gave users a joystick adaptor and increased the host machine's memory by a smart 16K. "The idea was simple, explains Hinsley. "It was not piratable and everyone, and I mean everyone, distributors, publishers, all of them, were keen to jump on the bandwagon. But they were waiting to see how the first game went down before licensing the technology. Mikro-Gen would have ruled the business if this had been a success. Mike Meek [Mikro-Gen's MD] planned to bring two games to market at once using Mikroplus, *Three Weeks In Paradise* and *Shadow Of The Unicorn*."

Unfortunately for Mikro-Gen the bankable Wally title, *Three Weeks In Paradise*, was a few weeks behind schedule so the company decided to release *Shadow Of The Unicorn* by itself alongside the Mikroplus. Reviewers hated the game, causing enthusiasm for the hardware add-on to dwindle. "Not only did the reviewers think *Shadow Of The Unicorn* was crap, it also meant nobody wanted to sign up for Mikroplus any more and Mikro-Gen had loads of stock of ROMs that they couldn't sell. It led to a cash crisis. The beginning of the end was upon us. *Three Weeks In Paradise* was recoded to take out all the extra graphics and gameplay that went on the ROM and Mikro-Gen went the way of history a few years later. The company just never recovered from the Mikroplus mess."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The story of Q

Ten years in the making, Qube Software is finally ready to launch its Q game middleware framework



Servan Keondjian, CEO,
Qube Software



Doug Rabson, CTO,
Qube Software

There have only been a couple of emerging companies we have covered here in Codeshop more frequently than the UK's best-kept middleware secret, Qube Software, and they all eventually went bust. Qube founder **Servan Keondjian** doesn't seem overly amused at the comparison, but considering he's been working on his game framework Q ever since he left Microsoft, after helping launching the DirectX standard in the mid '90s, it's presumably fair to say that, if the technology isn't ready for release now, it never will be.

"I'm confident Q is finally ready for the mainstream. It's been with some early adopters for about a year now"

"I'm confident Q is finally ready for the mainstream," he retorts during our latest meeting in the company's office, tucked away in a leafy north London residential street. "It's been with some of our early adopters for about a year now, and that's enabled us to get a sanity check that it does what we think it does, as well as polish it further."

Indeed, there are a number of companies already commercially employing the technology, including at least one which is using Q not to create games but to build an as-yet-

unannounced virtual/real-world entertainment service.

"If anyone thinks what we have works for them, we want to find a way to work with them," Keondjian says. But while Qubesoft has had discussions with what are referred to as 'large multinationals', hardcore game developers are the main target, at least for the present.

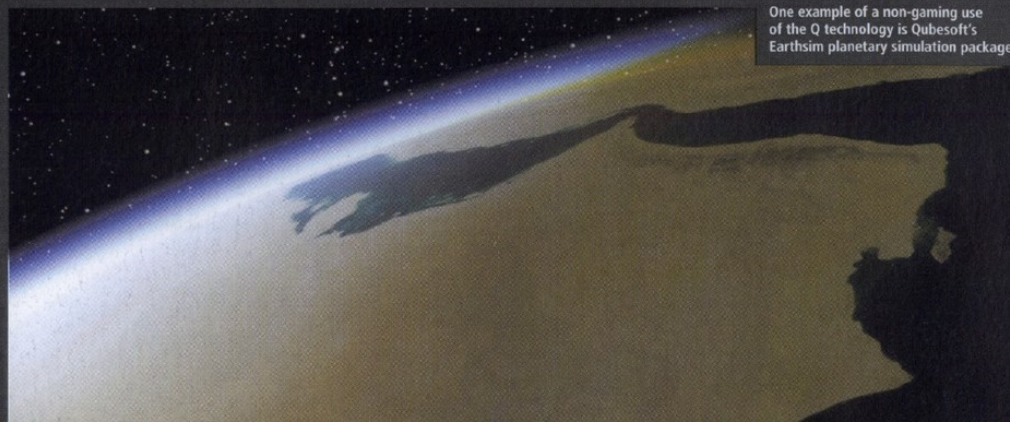
"Q has been designed to enable studios to standardise their underlying technology base while focusing on the technology that's specific to the games they're making," says CTO and chief architect **Doug Rabson**.

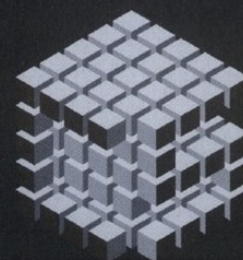
Following the current middleware philosophy – despite being a radical approach when Q was first conceived – the technology is presented as a set of plug-in modules held together by a lightweight cross-platform framework. Keondjian compares it to Lego, by which he means Q provides a box of different bricks as well as the defining details of the interlocking nodules that enable users to create their own new blocks.

"In terms of how it compares to what you get in a typical game engine, we provide everything except physics and

www.qubesoft.com

One example of a non-gaming use of the Q technology is Qubesoft's Earthsim planetary simulation package





artificial intelligence, because we think they're crucial to the type of game you want to make," Rabson explains. "But apart from that, you're getting all the pieces immediately below the level where you start writing your own game logic. We provide items such as rendering, background data streaming, animation systems and the mundane plumbing, as well as the framework, so you can insert your own specifically focused systems."

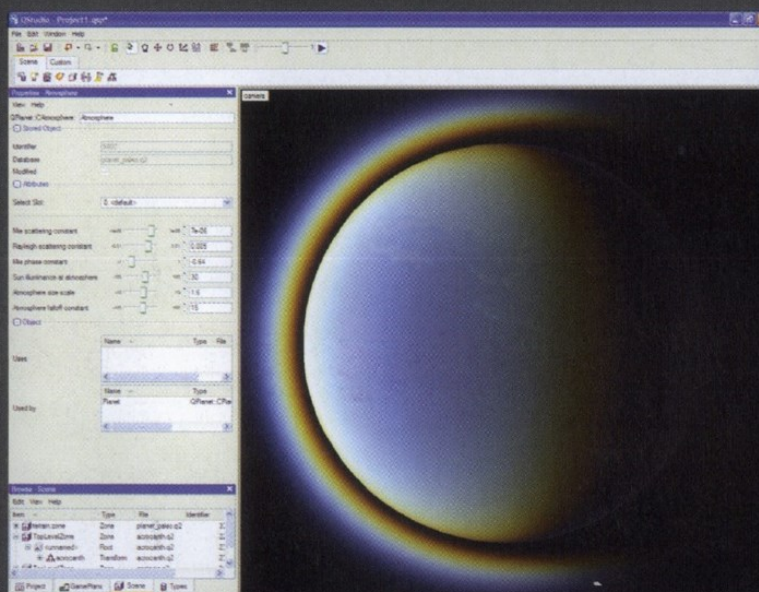
Assuming it all works as it's supposed to, the most pertinent question is how easy is it for developers to adopt? Keondjian says that while some studios could find Q a disruptive product in terms of how it fits with previous methodologies, it's fully in tune with broader industry trends.

"I think the analogy is the CGI industry where, over the years, tools such as 3DS Max and Maya have become more open, allowing people to write their own plug-ins," he points out. "You're starting to see similar moves with game engines in terms of shaders and things like that but we're ahead of curve because we've made middleware before and we've started out with a clean slate. So, in answer to your question, I think it's just about timing. The change will happen. The question is, how soon?"

In this respect, Rabson says Q provides studios with the opportunity to bridge a gap that at some point they will have to



Another part of Earthsim, yet to be fully exploited, will be the flora and fauna of early landmasses, which will also demonstrate Q's animation systems



Qubesoft's Q engine and its accompanying framework are backed with a studio production tool which links the realtime framework into the art pipeline. Building new tools in this framework will be the company's main focus in the future

deal with. One of the areas in which Qubesoft has been working with potential customers focuses on how Q can preserve any existing in-house tech by reworking it into the framework, which will then give it a longer lifespan.

"Say you've been developing a racing game series so you have a great physics model, track editor and a database of art assets. By rewriting and transplanting those pieces into the framework, you're suddenly going to have a really shiny new in-house engine," Keondjian says.

And it will be this, in terms of the framework providing a future-proofed foundation, that more than any other feature is likely to determine Q's success. Other middleware companies have taken similar routes to market during the past couple of years, only to find that developers have preferred more monolithic solutions such as Epic's Unreal Engine or small components such as IDV's SpeedTree. Sometimes, it seems, the

middle ground between more and less is akin to being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Keondjian says he's aware of this, however, and with the framework in place future work on Q will concentrate on the tools that every middleware vendor understands provide the best long-term differentiation within a crowded market. "Of course there will be bugs to fix and small API refinements to make, but the framework is essentially done, so building stuff on top is going to be our main ongoing plan," he predicts.

"The bottom line is I think there's a frustration with the state of things at the moment. The reason we set off to make Q was that we had made middleware before so we weren't going to make just another engine. We've spent ten years doing it, so what we're asking developers is, if we have done what we say we have done, surely it's worth checking out."

The 10,000 mile view

One middleware trend with which Qubesoft is in full agreement is that the best technology comes from companies who are also involved in game development. The company is using Q to develop its Earthsim product – an education-focused online simulation that in time will model the entire solar system. At the moment, however, it provides a historical view through the various geological ages of Earth's tectonic development as well as demonstrating the speed of its data streaming as it uses NASA's current Martian images to render the surface of the red planet.

"One of the reasons we did Earthsim was that it shows in a non-genre-specific way what you can do with Q," says Keondjian. "We used plenty of custom plug-ins and shaders in terms of the atmospheric rendering so it shows you can reconfigure the complete scene-rendering algorithm and you can plug in any shader you like. When people ask us: 'Do you have such and such a shader?', the answer is yes and no. The shader code is there and you can plumb it in within a couple of lines, and then it's supported throughout the entire toolchain."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** NaturalMotion Ltd

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** November 2001

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 60

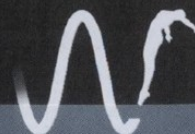
■ **KEY STAFF:** Torsten Reil, CEO; Adam Whittaker, COO



■ **URL:** www.naturalmotion.com



Beyond *GTAIV* and *The Force Unleashed*, Euphoria will be getting an extensive workout in the sports arena



NATURALMOTION



■ **LOCATION:**
Oxford, UK;
San Francisco, US

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Backbreaker. Euphoria is used in *GTA IV* and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*, plus several other unannounced titles

■ ABOUT THE STUDIO

"NaturalMotion develops motion synthesis and animation technology for games and has recently announced its first in-house title, *Backbreaker*."

"Originally spun out of Oxford University, the company's core technology, Euphoria, simulates humans in realtime on consoles or PCs, and creates truly surprising game moments and interactive characters. Euphoria will debut in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, followed by *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*."

"NaturalMotion's other run-time engine, Morpheme, gives animators control over in-game blends and transitions and integrates with Euphoria. It's used by BioWare, IO Interactive, Gearbox and CCP."

"Finally, NaturalMotion's Endorphin product is used

in many film and visual effects studios, in movies such as *Poseidon* and *Troy*, and commercials for Pepsi and Guinness. Its learning edition boasts more than 80,000 registered users."

"In September 2007, NaturalMotion announced its first in-house developed game, called *Backbreaker*. *Backbreaker* is the first American football title with fully interactive tackles, and marks the first project for the company's game development division."

"NaturalMotion's offices are located in Oxford, UK and in San Francisco, California. We pride ourselves on our good work/life balance, including healthy working hours, pizza Mondays, banana Wednesdays, masterclasses and evening cinema screenings."



Backbreaker aims to put the crunch back into American football games with realistic realtime tackles rather than pre-canned animations

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Senior Programmers	£ALL LEVELS	UK Wide
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University profile

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■ **INSTITUTION NAME:** Trinity College Dublin

■ **NUMBER OF STUDENTS:** 12,000

■ **URL:** www.cs.tcd.ie

■ **CONTACT:** ComputerScience.Secretary@cs.tcd.ie +353 (0)1 896 1765

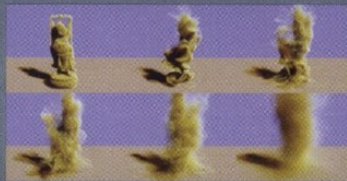
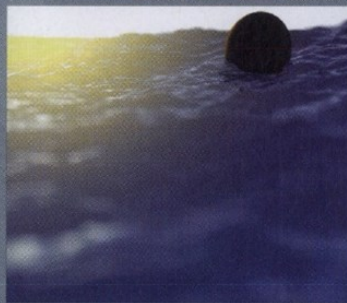


■ KEY STAFF

Dr Steven Collins, IET MSc course director (co-founder of Havok); Prof Carol O'Sullivan, professor of computer graphics and GV2 research group manager

■ KEY ALUMNI

Sean Blanchfield, CTO and co-founder, Demonware; David Gargan, principal engineer, Havok; Keith O'Connor, software engineer, Radical Entertainment, Canada; Jonathan Rice, senior software engineer, Nvidia



Centre: a still from an animation used for testing users' ability to detect incongruous motion in an ocean surface simulation, with realistic lighting effects. Above: a simulation of a sand Buddha inspired by Spider-Man 3's Sandman effects



■ **LOCATION:**
Dublin, Ireland

■ COURSES OFFERED:

MSc in computer science (interactive entertainment technology); MSc in computer science (mobile and ubiquitous computing); MSc in computer science (networks and distributed systems); MSc in multimedia systems; BA (Mod) in computer science; BA (Mod) in computer science, linguistics and a language

■ INSIDE VIEW: JOHN O'KANE STUDYING: MSC. IN INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY



"I first heard about this course while taking a year out after four years in the games industry. Other post-grad courses have shown up in the gaming field, but none had excited me like this one."

"It has been designed around the needs and skills required for engineers to work in the games or media field and doesn't shy away from providing a real challenge. For a recent graduate it's a very useful and pragmatic next step towards standing out from the crowd. Alternatively, if you are like me, it's a great chance to study state-of-the-art research in various upcoming games technology fields; an opportunity to see what's

around the corner over the next few years. I learned loads on topics I thought I already knew from excellent teaching staff, and also took the opportunity to improve on weaker areas like statistics and numerical methods. We have access to pretty much all the hardware you might need. I'm working on the Cell for my dissertation, there's an Xbox 360 on my lab desk and a Wii Remote Bluetoothed to a PC. Even from within a games company you probably wouldn't get the same time or potential to experiment."

"All these resources are brought together because of the quality of the course staff who are

well regarded, informed and connected. It is no coincidence that Trinity keeps producing some of better known games middleware companies and graduates. The course director co-founded Havok before setting up this course to help fill the global gap in good engineers. In addition we have had a stream of varied and interesting industry speakers from all over Europe covering different aspects of games development, from engine design to IP rights to art and design. I've had a lot of fun doing this course and the next time I'm asked to recommend someone for a job I'll be paying very close attention to those attending the IET MSc."

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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Size does matter

At the time of writing, I have no idea whether EA's bid to acquire Take-Two has succeeded or failed. But having just returned home from a 20-day business trip that encompassed both the DICE Summit in Las Vegas and the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, I've had time to think about the impact of scale on the future of commercial videogame development. What prompted this reflection? A pair of presentations from people at opposite ends of the videogame industry spectrum: EA CEO John Riccitiello and Q-Games president Dylan Cuthbert.

Riccitiello's presentation began as an analysis of the forces that are driving consolidation in the videogame sector. None of them would come as any surprise to you: bigger games; larger team sizes; multiplying platforms; localising to more and more international markets; culminating in *FIFA '08* shipping on

Games, BioWare and Maxis are empowered to develop and/or maintain their own cultures and make their own creative decisions. Say goodbye to the top-down unitary state that was partially to blame for the extinction of Origin Systems, Westwood and Bullfrog, and say hello to a federation of strong states, with a limited central government that lets the suits do what suits are best at while leaving the artists alone.

In hindsight, the entire presentation – complete with a modified limited mea culpa from Riccitiello for previous failed studio integrations – could have been seen as a public sales pitch to Sam and Dan Houser to stay on board at Rockstar if and when EA buys Take-Two... were it not for the fact that Riccitiello has already shaken up his company to structure it more appropriately for further acquisitions. The challenge that any large, publicly traded entertainment conglomerate faces is how to

studio seize control from publishers in order to make the games he wanted to make? By opting for small teams of five people or less. Modest budgets. Six-month development cycles. Scripted programming languages for rapid prototyping and iteration. Accessible, pick-up-and-play controls. A unified brand – *PixelJunk* – to both instill consumer awareness and spread the risk across multiple titles. And download-only, to avoid the difficulties that unique, niche titles can face at traditional retailers. For the crowd of mostly indie creators who attended Cuthbert's talk, it was a smart and necessary corrective to the doom and gloom of Riccitiello's DICE presentation, which both implicitly and explicitly suggested that acquisition was the inevitable fate of any successful independent developer.

Still, just because EA is publicly articulating one high-level strategy doesn't mean that it can't walk and chew gum at the same time. Lurking in the twilight, if not quite the shadows, is former EA Los Angeles general manager **Neil Young** and his new EA Blueprint division. There's been a lot of scuttlebutt about exactly what EA Blueprint is up to, but Young described it quite succinctly to *Variety* when he said: "We want to find a new way to make games with smaller teams." That's how the Wii quiz game *Smarty Pants* became a Facebook app, and Young, whose commercial failure *Majestic* now seems like an alternate-reality game that was ahead of its time, has other unique ways to launch game properties: clothing, live events, toys and more. If EA and the remaining big publishers can master both the high and low of modern development – creating titles on both large and small scales – the label-city-state-sleeper-cell could well become the dominant model for commercial game development in years to come.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/

How can development teams, which are constantly getting larger, still find a way to do genuinely innovative work?

eight platforms in 16 countries, requiring 20 different languages and 94 separate SKUs. From that perspective, consolidation is as natural as the lion consuming the gazelle, with companies like EA and the soon-to-be Activision Blizzard as two of the biggest predators roaming the savannah in search of new prey that they can swallow whole.

During his DICE talk, however, the new boss insisted that he was not merely the same as the old boss. Devouring, assimilating and all that jazz – that's so last millennium. Instead, Riccitiello touted both the new label structure that he put in place – EA Games, EA Sports, EA Casual and EA Sims – and the city-state model, in which individual studios like Criterion

marry inspiration and creativity (which theoretically emerges from the artisanal mode of production) with predictable product quality and scheduling (which is the hallmark of the industrial mode of production). And while the combination of the label system and the city-state model addresses the historical HQ-studio tensions, it does nothing to tackle one problem: how can development teams, which are constantly getting larger, still find a way to do genuinely innovative work?

That's where Dylan Cuthbert's GDC presentation comes in. In his equally astute analysis, big budgets make large publishers conservative, which in turn homogenises the finished games. So how could he and his small





Rampage through BIKINI BOTTOM as gigantic PLANKTON



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Where else?



BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

<need subdeck – pun on 'notes'?>

Next column: connections between previous columns? 'clean up' column? (Actually submit as rough notes?)

to-do: Hunter s Thompson had liquor expense account to keep mind 'lubricated' while writing columns, bother asking? Notes: a) could be read out of order, per Danielewski's House of Leaves. b) worry = too backwards looking. embed brand new topic/point(s).

(consider: more US vs UK jokes and vice versa. Brit slang? Work 'snog'/'bob's yr uncle' into something? validating 'Hi I'm randy' or not enough trashy/irreverent anymore? 30s new 20s. Right? To-do: delete Friendster account.)

column 3 = magnitude of interactivity. Discrete choices 'have less interactivity' than legit game system like *TH* skating, *GTAIII* driving, *Quake* combat, where player's input is analog, continuous. Eg – dialogue trees (discrete): 20 states (permutations) are possible;

limits. Note: Too pedantic. True for brits? Mock uk or us?) sub changes to uk spelling anyhow

3+5 = one crucial design process is selecting, for each 'part' of the game, how large the possibility space and therefore which interaction structure. (Caveat – talking quantity, not quality here.)

More analogue/systemic <> larger. Focus these on 'core gameplay'. If not enough depth, possibility, if player doesn't feel they own the experience, then core gameplay lacks longevity, not satisfying.

More discrete <> smaller. Focus these on 'peripheral' or 'streamlined' gameplay. If too much possibility, player bogged down in rich system where little input is meaningfully connected to core experience.

Media comprehension as similar to interactivity – 2 people watching same movie have different experiences, eg – were attending

X-Com, Civ, RTS, etc, really just resource for unlocking progress on upgrade tech tree, so how player allocates research can be thin ie discrete/small. Don't want/need most righteous ever science game. If game about scientists curing cancer (less nobel prize example? Inventing more burny napalm? better vending machine coffee?) then science research probably core gameplay, needs to be rich, varied, masterable.

Sadness = Too often games can't find analogue system for new type of core gameplay. Instead bail and wind up with discrete (eg – menus) or flavor some other game, eg – kart racer between coffee/napalm/cancer molecules. (existing examples? To-do: wikipedia science research games, make self look knowledgeable when summarising.)

'Parts' of games – similar to Clint Hocking's 'layers' from MiGS 2005. eg for Civ – building, tech tree, negotiation, warfare, etc. Each layer has its own (often similar – good for playability, ease of implementation) interaction structure(s). older (note – 'classic') example: *Archon* very distinct 'chess' layer and 'battle' layer. Another eg: *Spore*'s concept is (presumably) successive layers have order of magnitude relationship to adjacent layers, cool example of theory leading to actionable design.

Quality – art expresses observations about life (column 4), classified as: aesthetic (how it feels) and narrative (how it works). the micro and macro of experience. (Totally made this up. are these really distinct? inclusive?) Micro/aesthetic in film = using cinematography to create feel/tone; the color of the paint. Macro/narrative in film = what happens: story, script, scenes, etc; what is depicted with the paint.

In interactive art, observations are expressed using behavior of simulations, how player input <> action on screen. Micro = the feel of interaction, eg – how it feels to switch lanes high speed in traffic, participating in the joyful kinetic world of *Katamari*, how Nintendogs respond when petted. Macro = usually not the framing story since often not interactive, but instead the 'emergent narrative', the story written by player activity – eg – I 50/50 grinded (ground?) that rail then heelflipped into a nollie. Or: I was trying to hide the body when I heard a patrolling guard, so I decided to... etc. Both types (micro/macro) are elements of the possibility space, crafted by constraining/enabling interactions (ideally towards aesthetic goals).

End with (attempt at) inspiring call to action.

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. We hope it's in more complete shape than this at release

callout max regular 11.5pt. callout max regular 11.5pt. callout max regular 11.5pt. callout max regular 11.5pt.

Tony Hawk: too many to enumerate, intuitive pattern matching brain takes over instead.

analogue + continuous = clearly 'legit' system; what about discrete + continuous, as per FF? ie – no 'action' gameplay, but tons of connected discrete choices? Conversely – disconnected analogue input. Eg: freedom to explore entire screen, but only fixed xyz's have any meaning – analogue reduces to discrete.)

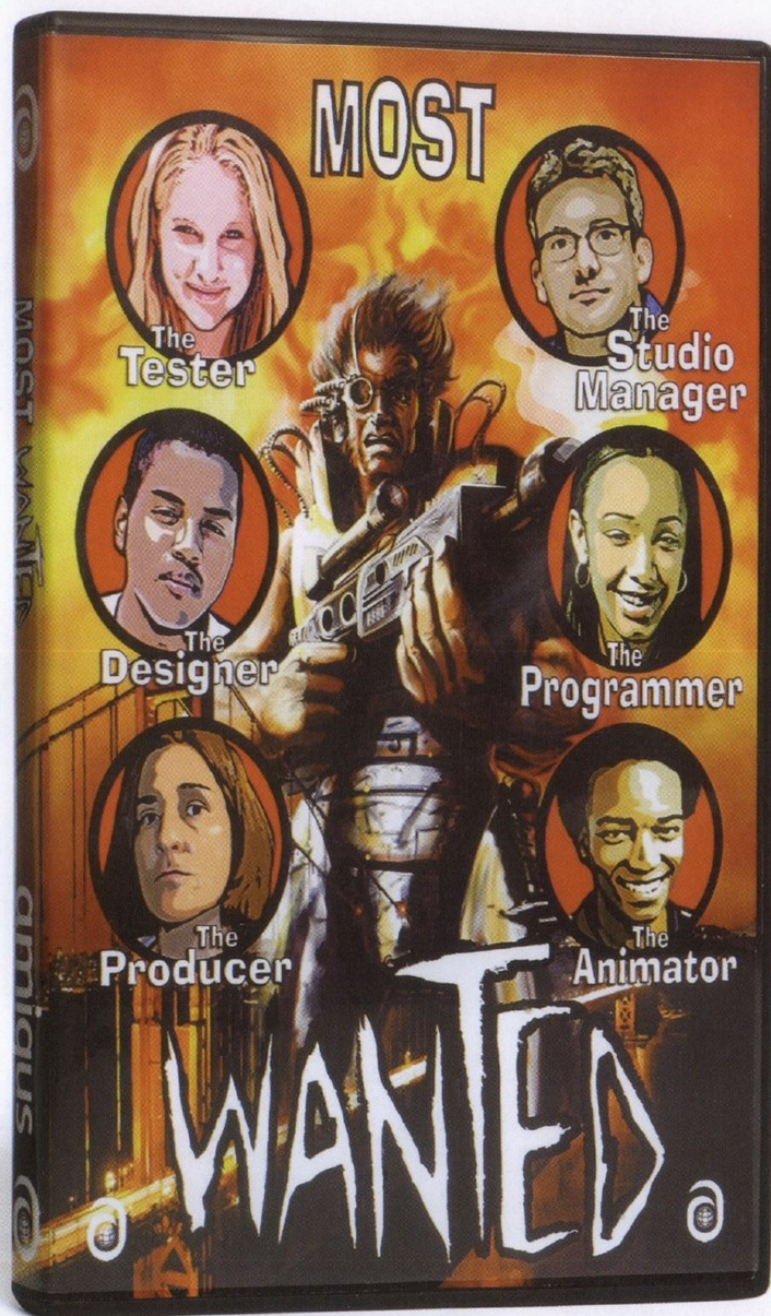
column 5 = 'possibility space'. Game design = crafting what's possible in the game world. (aside: 'game world' not just physical space, also how skating, combat, character interaction, etc, works. ie, 'how they work' as space. Players explore this 'space' too – what happens if I push the simulation in this direction, what are the

different parts of screen (Timecode). Or understand story better on second viewing. Differentiate between 'Audience experience varies', 'Media is dynamic across time' as per film, music, and 'The media itself is actually different' – ie – only interactive art. Interactive art = size(possibility space) > 1? Important to formalize, or just academic? Did other media evolve in part by leveraging self-awareness?

One ideal goal: matching structure to content, form to function, perfect eg = mccloud's *Understand Comics* is in comic book form. game about games? SEX SEX SEX – do readers jump directly here? Put something useful nearby. WET NAKED SYMMETRICAL PEOPLE

Eg – 'scientific research' as game layer. In

awaiting image



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BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

The final curtain

Five years is a long time. Indeed, it's half a lifetime in the case of a ten-year-old, and an eternity as far as a mayfly goes. This year, the space year 2008 AD, marks the fifth anniversary (that's – ahem – 'wood' if you were thinking of giving a gift) of the year 2003; 12 months that the videogame industry would flounder to describe as vintage.

The better of 2003's game releases included *Knights Of The Old Republic*, *Zelda: Wind Waker*, *Call Of Duty* and *Viewtiful Joe*. Regrettably, it was also the year of *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness*, *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, and – lest we forget its profound lack of enduring legacy – the N-Gage. Who in 2003 could have predicted that, five years after it was already five years overdue, *Duke Nukem Forever* would still officially be in development, or that Sony would quite so spectacularly lose its grip on the hind legs of the public relations goat?

likely to be found playing *Brain Training* on the way to work as they are to be reading about our imminent economic and environmental collapse in some broadsheet doom-rag.

Where the videogame industry goes over the next half a decade is anyone's guess. Albeit to a lesser extent than the music industry, gaming is similarly dragging its limber, sweating trunk up a peak of profound change. It's likely that the trend for exclusive, mega-budget, AAA titles will need to be slowed in favour of cheaper, more focused downloadable titles developed by relatively modest teams. And I wouldn't be surprised if there were more standout, original games in place of identikit, me-too titles. Do we really need quite so many urban thriller 'em ups? Or that many EXTREME!!!! racing games? Is there a large enough market to sustain them all? Only Johnny Witless would believe so.

gaming goose with its knees, and Nintendo will have indeed released its hands-free successor to the Wii (and maybe the hardware will actually embrace modern audiovisual technology... or perhaps Nintendo will simply plough further along its gaming purity furrow, by releasing a plug-in, monochrome version of *Dr Mario* that you can control with farts and coughs).

You never know: maybe Sony and Microsoft will even see sense and join forces – a step closer to the single format some believe the industry needs to survive. Seriously, is there any point in having two competing formats which are virtually identical in terms of power and content? The videogame industry moves in cycles, but there's a definite sense that, in the next five years, it's going to cover a lot of ground. Whatever the next shift is, it's unlikely to be a pigeon-step but a big, lumbering, ostrich-leap.

So, after five years, this is the last **Edge** column I'll ever write. This year marks the fifth since I stopped writing *Digitiser*, and took up residency in **Edge**. It's also my 15th year as someone who gets paid to write about videogames – that's three lots of five years, for pity's sake – and that's quite long enough, cheers very much.

In the spirit that a sign-off deserves, big ups to the current **Edge** team. Many thanks to their predecessors and anyone else I've forgotten (which is everyone else). Genuine thanks to anyone who has ever said anything nice about my column (matron), and sincere apologies to anyone that I've managed to upset or offend over the last five years – it wasn't ever personal.

So, that's that. Off into the sunset. Never say never and all that. It's been emotional.

Buh-bye, everybody!

Mr Biffo co-founded *Digitiser*, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

Even a gurgling infant could guess the broad strokes of where we're headed; filling in the fine detail is more difficult

Anyone who has been in the videogame industry for any real length of time will tell you that the topography shifts with alarming speed. Hell, unless you're spectacularly dense, you're doubtlessly clued-up enough to have noticed this perverse phenomenon for yourself. In gaming, half a decade is forever.

In five years the videogame industry went from *Pong* to *Intellivision*, from NES to Mega Drive to Super NES, from Sega Saturn to Sega in the shittypot, from *Super Mario World* to *Super Mario 64*. In the past five years, digital distribution of videogames has become a locked-in reality, and gaming has diversified to such an extent that there's a title for every demographic slice, with commuters now as

However, to make such predictions is to state the bleedingly, boringly obvious. Even a gurgling infant could guess the broad strokes of where we're headed; filling in the fine detail is more difficult.

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter and *Grand Theft Auto 2* may have been set in 2013 (according to Wikipedia) but if you asked me to predict the state of the gaming landscape five years from now, I'd be forced to meet your question with a bizarre, apathetic honk. Maybe Sony will have reversed the critical fortunes of its PS3. Maybe Microsoft will have released a build of the Xbox 360 that doesn't implode every time somebody looks at it a bit funny. Perhaps Apple will have attempted to grasp the



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inb0x



Issue 186

F ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from
Edge Online's
discussion forum

Topic: Your Greatest Defeats
That's right, those moments
when despite your best (and
thrilling) efforts, you fall to
your enemy/opponent. Be they
flesh and blood or machine.
Chief

Every time I play *HL2*
deathmatch.
Adkm1979

I thought I was a pretty decent
gamer. I got Live. FAIL!
HuntKilljoy

Lost on the Games World
series 2 final to some pleb at
World Heroes 2. For some
reason, SNK thought it wise
to make a dragon punch input
throw a fireball, and a fireball
input perform a dragon
punch... grrr!
Impactor 2.0

Mario Kart Double Dash. Baby
Park. Myself and my cousins
have weekly tournaments on
that track. It is MY TRACK.
Leading by three quarters of
the track, 2 laps left. Blue
Shell. 3 red shells. 3 red shells.
Blue Shell. Green shell.
Defeat, in 4th place.
Dark Soldier

I couldn't help but feel taken
aback by Hironobu Sakaguchi's
claim in *E182* that "we don't see enough
emotion in videogames yet". Now, I've
always enjoyed *Final Fantasy* and the
works of Sakaguchi, but given his talk
of *Lost Odyssey*'s 'graphical realism'
and its backstory being penned by an
acclaimed novelist, it stung me to think
that such an experienced game designer
could only put the emotional strength
of a game down to its graphical and
narrative prowess.

Truly the most powerful emotions

a game? If we do, then it's time
developers put the focus back on
the feel of the game itself.

Liam Kelly

Perhaps the real beef here is with
cutscenes, not story itself. Game
designers, like *Far Cry 2*'s Clint
Hocking, are learning how to tie
narrative closer to gameplay by using
the rules of the game to tell the story,
so perhaps we can expect videogames
to express better emotional range in
the future with both elements working

No FMV sequence or cutscene of a beloved character dying has matched the sheer cathartic intensity of getting that very last star in *Super Mario Galaxy*

I experience in games come simply
from playing the games themselves.
Even through the simple act of trying to
finish a level or top the hi-score table,
fear, shock, ambition, fury, courage
and triumph can pulsate through the
player's heart in twisting, chaotic
amounts. Aren't these emotions, which
defined gaming's early classics, enough?

While compelling narratives and
realistic environments can add to a
game, most developers now rely solely
on these elements to trigger emotions
from players. Sadly, such a move makes
today's games feel emotionally weaker
than the less powerful, more playable
games of old, so can designers really
see this move as progress?

No FMV sequence of an immense
city or cutscene of a beloved character
dying has matched the sheer cathartic
intensity of getting that very last star
in *Super Mario Galaxy*, a game that
confidently reminds us of where the
true emotional power of games lies.
Not in story, not in graphics, but in
gameplay. Do we need more emotion in

together. Anyway, please don't get too
emotional over the DS Lite on its way.

Prior to the completely baffling
mix of reviews over *Assassin's
Creed* I figured 'what the hell' and
bought it with the intention of making
up my own damn mind. After
completing the story and having a half-
hearted stab (aha) at the ridiculous
Gamerpoint tick lists (flags?) I can
completely understand why this game
has been subject to such uneven
criticism. As an experience, *Assassin's
Creed* is awesome. As a game, it
stumbles. There are times when the
game feels nothing more than a
glorified sat-nav.

There has been a lot of talk recently
over the relevance of games to society.
Are games art? Should games portray
political commentary? Well, to be
honest, most gamers couldn't care less.
Do we really need political stimulation
to enjoy videogames? Of course not.
The Wii alone is testimony to how
less can be more. *Assassin's Creed*,



The best letter
wins a DS Lite

however, is complicated. We praise
games such as *BioShock*, which
questions moral choices of the player.
Assassin's Creed similarly questions
the intentions of each assassination
as Altaïr begins to doubt his own
actions. However, by questioning
the 'good vs evil' template but not
allowing the player to deviate from the
storyline the game creates a neutral
journey that becomes devoid of
personality. Hollow conversations
and interactive camera angles may
demonstrate cinematic flair but do
little to enhance the player's
involvement with the game itself.
Perhaps it is only through the
firstperson perspective we can truly
empathise with videogame characters.

And so we must question when a
game stops becoming a game. As your
columnist Randy Smith stated (*E185*),
'we [computer games] rock spatial
exploration in a way no other art form
can touch'. Too true, but what's
important is whether the space is
worth exploring.

Sweep

We can only empathise with game
characters through firstperson? You
realise, of course, that you're risking
the wrath of Team Silent and Fumito
Ueda devotes the world over.

Why do so many games that I buy never print a postal address anywhere on the CD case, in the instructions or on the sleeves?

I would often like to write to the game's designers — I think I have some useful things to say. I never see games that include the words 'If you have any comments or suggestions then please send them to... and we will do all we can to answer your letter'. Why not?

Could you tell them from me that it would be great to be able to write to them?

Rob Bailey

Well, Gamecock reckons it will include developers' addresses in its game manuals. And Gabe Newell gave his email address away in the developer commentary included in *The Orange Box* (gaben@valvesoftware.com, by the way). For the rest there are always developer websites to haunt — if you can make it past the fanboys, that is.

I don't like to be forced to do anything. If I want the shorter load times, I would at least like the choice to play from the disc or install the game

Capcom specifically, and a few other developers, have taken it upon themselves to enforce mandatory installs on their newest PS3 games. If you want to play *Devil May Cry 4* or *Lost Planet* on PS3, be prepared to install the entire game to your hard drive to shave

off a few seconds of load times between levels (never mind that the install itself takes 20+ minutes).

If you frequent any videogame message boards, you'll find the gaming elite bemoaning anyone that even suggests there is something wrong with the forced install. I have two major gripes with this recent turn of events. The first is I don't like to be forced to do anything. If I want the shorter load times, I would at least like the developer to offer a choice to play from the disc or install the game. And really, I feel this is something Sony should mandate and make a part of its thirdparty publishing approval process.

My second gripe is a concern for the future ramifications of mandatory installs: if more and more developers begin to force installations of their games, gamers will find themselves running out of disc space. I love my iPod because I have spent years customising it to my liking. I would

like to do the same with my PS3, and not be forced to delete things simply because developers have stopped giving console gamers a choice.

Gamers and the gaming press need to push the console manufacturers and game developers on these issues. I felt



Devil May Cry 4 needs to be installed to hard drive if you want to play it on PS3. Its cache of files can be deleted, but, as Yameen notes, it goes against console gaming's 'plug-and-play' ethos

F

Topic: All The Small Things

There has been many a post celebrating the big moments in gaming history but I think it's time we appreciated the smaller ones.

sidesalad

Sniping in *COD4*. I was instructed to kill a guard in a tower, looked but couldn't find him. At which point I was told "not that tower, the one to your right."

equinox_code

Being called a terrorist in *Deus Ex*. By your real name.

mistercrayon

Winning *Shenmue II*'s Duck Race. My housemates questioned my sanity on numerous occasions watching me do that.

Box Factory

The way Richter Belmont's arm subtly changes position depending on what direction you push when you have the whip/flail unfurled in *Castlevania: SOTN*.

Roujin

Slowing down the car slightly to allow CJ to shut the door on a car in *San Andreas*.

shindig

MGS, when you have to unplug from player 1 and plug into player 2 to beat Psycho Mantis.

mr t-301

The way Sonic flails his arms when teetering on the edge of a platform. The lightning cannon in *Turrican*. The hill in *Cannon Fodder*. Also, the stomach wounds. These are a few of my favourite things...

darthjimin

Gears — the heat haze from the barrel of your weapon after firing (something they've only recently added.)

Curtis

When you change Frank into a dress in *Dead Rising* and he does that disturbing squirming dance, rubbing himself and groaning. Mental. And yes, the fact that the cutscenes reflect what you look like and are not just some prerendered pieces of FMV that ruin the continuity.

Gremill



Far Cry 2's developers said in issue 185 that the game's interaction with African villagers would be confined to weapons-free sections of the game devoted to advancing the story

the whole Red Ring of Death issue took far too long to become vocalised to the point where Microsoft actually responded (two years!). Gamers are seemingly enjoying tossing their money around this generation. Now developers are doing their own bit of experimentation at our expense.

Yameen

Sorry to sound all 'gaming elite', but is 20 minutes of installation really as bad as consoles prematurely dying?

Do games have a moral obligation to be politically sensitive? In recent months we have seen a handful of games clumsily attempt a politically savvy narrative and blunder into every stereotypical pitfall they could. Now, however, games are about to breach an almost untouched setting: Africa.

Both *Far Cry 2* and *Resident Evil 5* have chosen this setting as an environment in which to destroy countless hordes of digital natives. More importantly, however, their plots are likely to involve the distribution and flow of medicines in the area. Here I'm making a slightly educated guess about the plot of *Resident Evil 5*, but the evil drug company Umbrella and its infamous T-virus are bound to crop up somewhere. These are controversial and current issues surrounding the African nations as warlords illegally cut supply chains of life-saving vaccinations for a profit. My question is this: if the game designers decide to tackle these issues, will they represent a fair and unbiased opportunity for the player to learn something important through the medium of a videogame? If they do, will their risk be rewarded?

Secondly, can a mature audience really learn something from what are likely to be two extremely violent

Continued >

games? How many of us wanted to find out more about the plight of the residents of Mogadishu after we watched *Black Hawk Down*, a film criticised for its exploitative and stereotypical representation of the African people? Are games going to continually fall back into the politically ignorant category, or will a games company attempt to tackle these issues head on and help change mass opinion in the medium's favour?

Catherine Martin

Ah, more politics in games. For one thing, the developers of *Far Cry 2* claim that they have been careful to restrict violence to mercenaries, not the residents of its fictional country. And Capcom is still playing *Resident Evil 5*'s story and setting very close to its chest. Certainly, games should exercise sensitivity, however. Whether they need to tackle political issues to gain greater

F

Topic: Now Playing

I'd just like to say that *Audiosurf* is wonderful and, as it's only a fiver on Steam, everyone should buy it.
soggymuppet

Oblivion – revisited this week after a massive hiatus. Only about 20 hours in still.
StarryVeck

Football Manager is keeping me from things I really should be doing.

Kazuo

Just been playing *Audiosurf* for the last hour and a half. Had a bit of a mix on the go: Ozric Tentacles, The Tragically Hip, Tangerine Dream and Talvin Singh. Well worth the £5-6. I was using a wired 360 pad, which made the whole experience. Force feedback and comfy controls... magic.

Lerxst

mainstream respectability is the real question. We welcome your thoughts.

How come you describe Pete Smith like he's a part of Media Molecule in your *LittleBigPlanet* preview and associated UGC article [E186] instead of making clear he was from Sony external development? I thought you were all about the actual developer, but no one from Media Molecule was even involved in the article, and no mention made of that. I could see it if SCEE owned Media Molecule, but they don't. Are they that controlling of it?

The appeal of *LBP* for me is not just the potential if they miraculously supersede Sony's creaking backend, but the creativity and interests of the developers, not to mention the perils of being a small independent with such a high-risk project.

To have an SCEE producer take credit for all that and sound off about

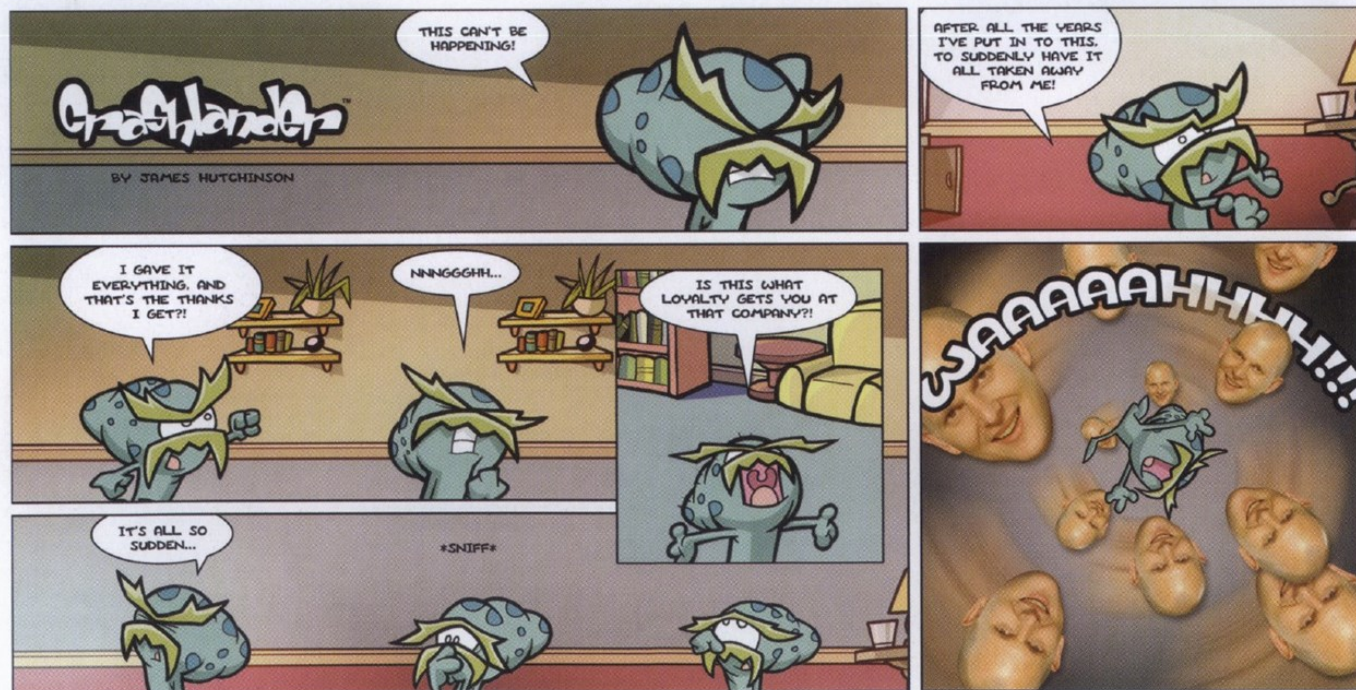
how he hoped people would do this and they wanted this and that was galling.

I'm sure Pete Smith's nice and all, but the relationships and motivations weren't made clear.

Daddy J

Not clarifying that Pete Smith works for Sony Computer Entertainment Europe and that he is in fact *LBP*'s external producer was an oversight; there was no suggestion that he or SCEE, and not Media Molecule, should take credit for what is evidently an enormous project. (And you do recall issue 174's cover story, in which we interviewed Media Molecule's tech and creative directors, yes?)

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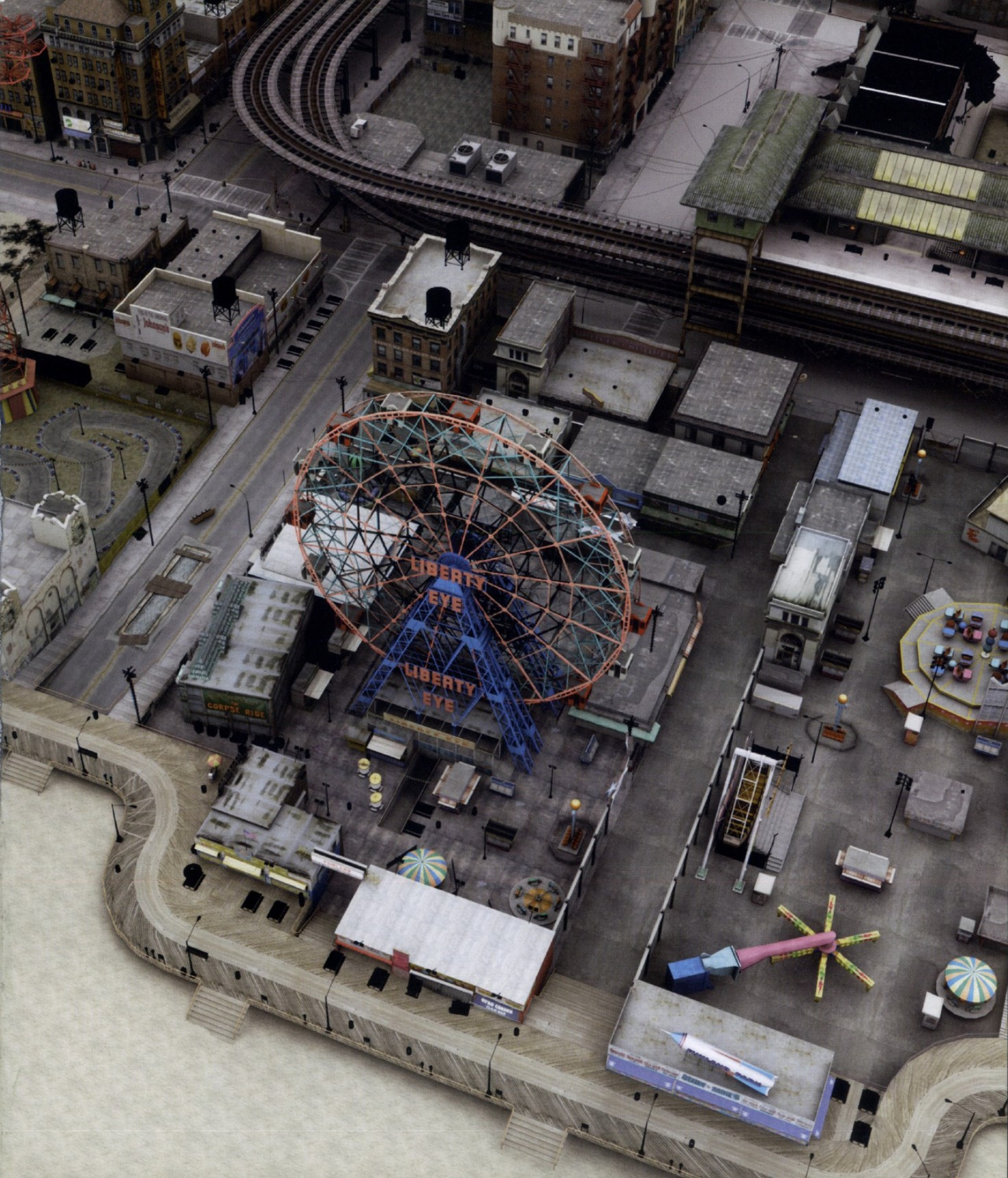
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